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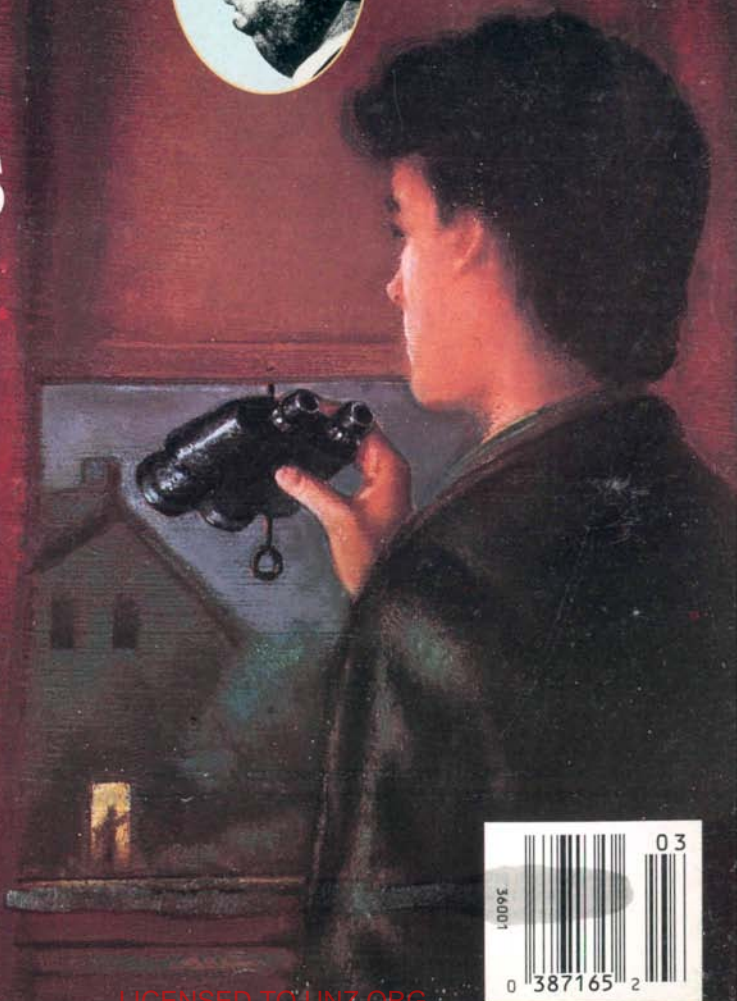


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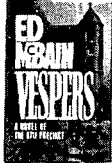
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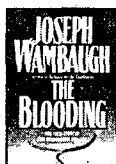
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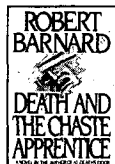
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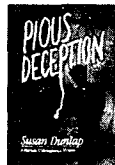
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

At Bouchercon XX, the annual convention of mystery readers and writers which took place in October in Philadelphia, two sets of awards were given.

The Anthony's, in honor of Anthony Boucher, famed mystery critic and author for whom the convention is named, are nominated and voted on by members of the convention. This year their choices—with the winners in bold-face type—were the following:

BEST MYSTERY NOVEL OF 1988:

The Silence of the Lambs by
Thomas Harris

The Widows Club by Dorothy
Cannell

"E" Is for Evidence by Sue Graf-
ton

A Thief of Time by Tony Hill-
erman

Blood Shot by Sara Paretsky
Dead Crazy by Nancy Pickard
Shackles by Bill Pronzini
Pepper Pike by Les Roberts

BEST FIRST MYSTERY NOVEL OF
1988:

A Great Deliverance by Eliz-
abeth George

Murder Once Done by Mary
Lou Bennett

Killing at Badger's Drift by
Caroline Graham

Random Access Murder by
Linda Grant

Fear of the Dark by Gar
Anthony Haywood

Carolina Skeletons by David
Stout

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF
1988:

Something Wicked by Caro-
lyn G. Hart

(continued on page 41)

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FICTION

—My Mother,— My Daughter,— —Me—

by Margaret
—Maron—

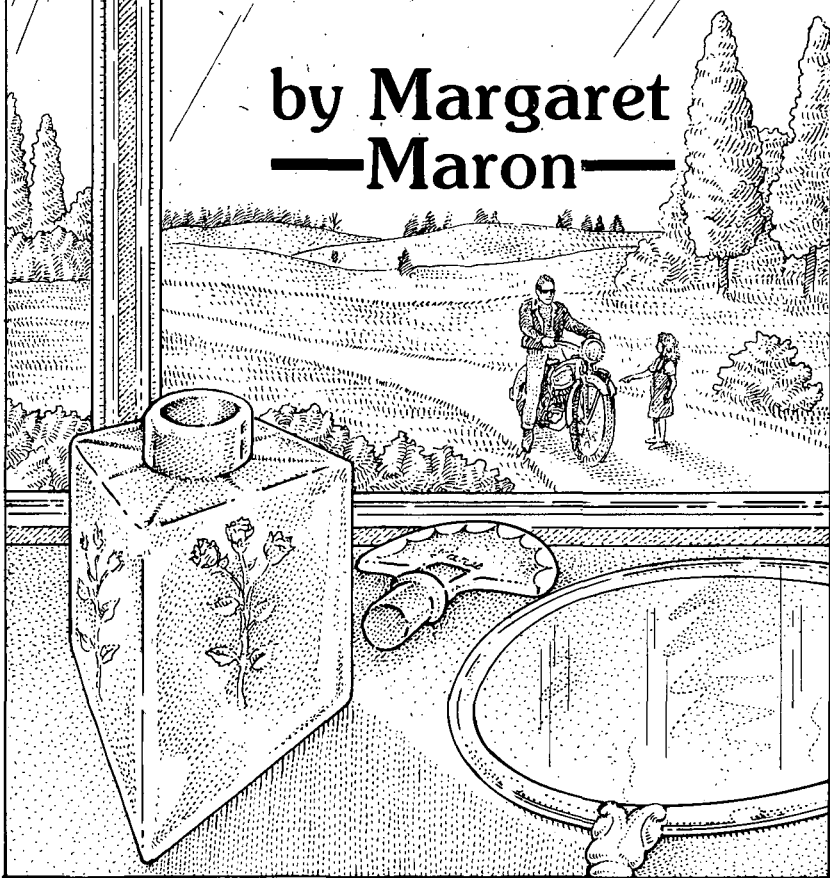


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

It isn't just me, is it? Surely other mothers of little girls experience this uncanny sensation when time overlaps and folds back, when they feel they've lived this incident before in another body or seen it through different eyes?

For instance, when I tell five-year-old Beth, "You're not going out in shorts in the middle of winter!" and she glares at me a long level moment before she stalks off to change, then I know—I mean I really *know*—exactly what she's feeling. More than that, I *am* her, whirling away from my mother and biting back the rebellious words that would get me a spanking.

I flounce upstairs and yank open the dresser for those ugly woolen slacks, banging my anger, but not hard enough to bring Mama up with the fly swatter. (And how come *that* never gets put away for winter?)

With an almost physical jerk, I pull myself back to the present of 1965. I'm me again and getting irritable and if Beth slams the drawer just one more time, she's going to get a smack on the bottom.

You see? It's been like this since she was a toddler. My husband doesn't understand; but a girlfriend said recently, "I never liked my mother much till my daughter started glaring at me

every time I spoke to her. Suddenly I understand." Yes.

And yet, somehow, that isn't exactly it. Not all of it anyhow. Even though I'm an adult now, safely married with a successful husband, comfortable house, and daughter of my own, it's only the child I once was that I fully understand, not Mama. I was probably no more aggravating than Beth, but these day-to-day flashes of irritation don't make me stop loving Beth. So why did Mama stop loving *me*?

Perhaps if she hadn't died the year I married Carter, Beth's birth could have bridged the unspoken distance between us. Or is the apparent warmth between most mothers and their grownup daughters only a mutual pretense while the politeness between Mama and me is the unavoidable reality?

Must Beth and I come to that?

I was four, almost five, when I learned not to take Mama's love for granted. Her moods were as uncertain as that wartime spring of 1945. There were moments of unquestioned security, but too often I would look up from play and see her watching me from a window, her eyes bleak with foreboding—almost as if I were a Nazi hand grenade primed to explode in her face.

Eventually, as the larger world groped its way back to sanity, so did my small one. My father came home from the Merchant Marine to stay, and by the time I was an adolescent, the stiffness between Mama and me was taken for granted. Yet even now, twenty years later, when Beth touches in me a sense of déjà vu and I look at myself/Mama through Beth's/my eyes, then I yearn for that barely-remembered closeness and again I wonder. . . .

Today I sit before the mirror in my bedroom, intent on getting my makeup exactly right. I'm meeting my husband for dinner and, like most men, Carter feels flattered when he thinks I've taken special pains just for him. Except for slipping into my new mini-skirted A-line, I can leave as soon as our teenaged neighbor gets home from school to sit with Beth.

Beth sprawls across my bed as she watches me in the mirror and whines halfheartedly about being left behind. She knows I won't relent and that Karen will indulge her most outrageous demands, but she has to keep her hand in. Her restless fingers flip the dial of my clock-radio, and as the serious tones of a newscast fill the room, I lift my hand to keep her from changing it. My favorite cousin

is with the Seventh Fleet, but it isn't mentioned; and when I drop my hand, Beth turns to a rock station, muttering, "Why do they always have to have wars?"

Why? I echo silently. The newest Beatles song floods the room, but I'm lost in sudden memories of the staccato war bulletins that used to burst from our old radio and transfix the grownups in alert uneasiness. The words, urgent and tense and half-obsured with static; meant nothing to me; but that sudden adult fear made me afraid, too, without knowing why.

After "God bless Mama and Daddy," I was taught to pray, "and bring Uncle Paul home safe from the war." But that was as much a part of the ritualistic ending as "and-make-me-a-good-girl-amen." Uncle Paul, Mama's younger brother, had been in Europe for three of my four years and I did not remember him. He was killed at Bastogne in December of 1944, although it was March before we knew for sure. When Mama put down the phone, I was appalled. I'd never seen her cry, had never realized there were things that *could* make an adult cry.

Someone—I forget just who—put an arm around Mama and shooed me off to the candy

store with a handful of pennies. That night Mama interrupted my prayers harshly. "Didn't you understand? Uncle Paul is *dead*!" And so I stopped praying for him, even though his deletion left a gap in the singsong formula that bothered me for months.

Eyes finished, I begin on my lips and Beth draws near to watch. She stands on one foot and leans against my bare shoulder, staring at me in the mirror objectively while her lips arc in unconscious imitation. Amused, I recall watching Mama put on her blood-red lipstick; but this is only another of those surface memories that color all our familiar actions when our children watch.

Bored, Beth goes to the window to look for Karen, then returns to play with the dozen or so perfume vials on my dressing table, souvenirs of all the foreign ports my cousin's ship has visited.

A schoolbus rumbles to a halt outside and the little glass bottles tinkle as Beth whirls away, dancing across the room to the window.

"Karen! Wait! I'm coming now!" she shrieks, and kisses me hastily. I hear her light footsteps patter on the stairs as I, too, call down to Karen with last-minute instructions.

Beth waves up to me as I stand at the window in my lace-trimmed slip; and although her smile is gay, though she leaves me without another backward look, skipping up to Karen and draping the older girl's sweater around her thin shoulders as she follows Karen across our wide lawn, I am suddenly filled with unbearable anguish and something colder.

Guilt?

Guilt at deserting my child?

Ridiculous! I'm as good a homemaker as Donna Reed, as devoted a mother as June Cleaver. Surely the few hours I'm away each week take nothing from Beth. Her father and I will be home before nine thirty. Carter doesn't like late hours or any music that rocks harder than Pat Boone's, and after six years of marriage, we don't exactly linger over candlelit tables.

But the feeling of guilt persists, overshadowed now by a growing sense of desolation so strong that I sit down before the mirror again, perplexed. Absently I straighten the perfume bottles Beth has muddled and see that one has come unstopped. It's a small cube of dark green porcelain, sprigged with minute red roses, and its heavy fragrance permeates down through layer after layer of suppressed memories . . . *how*

incredible that I could have forgotten so completely!

It arrived on a cold dreary day in early March when it seemed that winter would last forever. Mama took the box from the postman and knelt on the living room rug to tear it open. It'd been months since Daddy's last shore leave, and presents trickled back to us in lieu of the letters he never wrote.

I realize now that those presents must have been a pledge more to himself than to Mama and me that there was a time and world unbounded by gray North Atlantic waters and deadly U-boats. In later years he was such a silent, preoccupied, just-there father that I forgot how perceptive his gifts had been.

I asked him once to tell me how mermaids ran and was crushed when he explained the difference between the glittering mermaids I'd imagined and the grim actuality of the Murmansk Run. But weeks later, he sent back a tiny wooden mermaid scaled with golden sequins.

That day, Mama lifted the square green bottle from its nest of tissue and let me touch the exquisite ceramic roses. Then she smoothed some perfume on her bare white arms

and lay back upon the rug, her eyes closed; and while chill March rains streamed down the windowpanes, the room filled with the heavy languorous scent of full-blown roses under a hot June sun.

"What does this say?" I asked, tickling her nose with the note that had fallen out. She opened her eyes, crossed them for my benefit, and read, "'This reminded me of the day we met.'"

"Didn't you always know Daddy?" I asked, as much in surprise as to prolong her mood.

"I was the original farmer's daughter," she answered flippily. She gazed around the spacious rooms with their deep rugs and polished tables and Sadie clattering out in the kitchen beyond many closed doors. "Luckily for me, he wasn't a traveling salesman."

I held my breath, hoping she would go on. She so seldom forgot that I was a child. She lay on the rug looking up at the ceiling with dreamy eyes and let me see her as she'd been that hot summer day when Daddy drove by in the first yellow convertible she'd ever seen.

Sweaty and barefoot, she'd just hoed to the end of a long tobacco row when Daddy tapped his horn and asked if he were on the Raleigh road. He wasn't, but before he could turn the car, its radiator boiled over.

"Your Uncle Paul was only sixteen and practically pushing his mule and plow down the furrow, just dying to see that car up close."

One good look at Mama with her long black hair hanging free beneath a faded straw hat, and Daddy couldn't seem to get his yellow convertible started.

He accepted Grampa's invitation to a cold glass of sweet tea and would have maneuvered to stay for supper if Uncle Paul, tempted beyond the limits of good manners, hadn't slipped down the lane in the growing dusk and started the car with no trouble. Mama walked down the lane with him, pausing in the twilight to pick a cluster of Gran's climbing roses.

"They were still warm from the sun and your daddy took them and said he was sure he could get lost again the next week if he tried. Anyhow, we got married right after barning season."

She was eighteen.

It was better than a fairy tale and Daddy was Prince Charming. I was so full of love for them both that I hugged Mama hard. She squeezed me absently, then got up and stood before the mirror above our marble fireplace. She tucked stray ends of her black hair back into its smooth pageboy.

"I'm twenty-five years old and just look at me! My life's half over and nothing's happening. Oh, Libby, your daddy's been gone so long and this old war's never going to end. I'm so tired of being lonesome!"

I could have wept for her; but Sadie came in just then, her small frame draped in a long raincoat, to tell Mama our lunch was ready. With Daddy gone, there wasn't enough work to fill Sadie's day, so Mama made her leave at noon.

She would have dispensed with Sadie altogether if Daddy'd let her because she felt Sadie blamed her for all the changes the war had made: Daddy's absence, the parties no longer given, the other maids lured away by higher factory wages.

But things had been changing for our family long before this latest war. Once the whole northwest quadrant of town had been Watson land; now our house stood on less than a hundred acres of overgrown pasture and scrub woodland. A hundred acres out of all those thousands, and what had been an isolated country estate was increasingly threatened by gas stations, factories, and truck-filled highways as the town pushed north and west and began to act like a city.

As the youngest Watson, I didn't mind the encroachment.

A ten minute walk along neglected bridle paths brought me out to the highway where a small general store sat between two truck depots. Sugar rationing or not, one glass case was always heaped with penny candy, and if I didn't have a penny, one of the drivers lounging there between runs would usually treat a little girl if she looked wistful enough. At four-going-on-five, I'd barely heard of Shirley Temple or Margaret O'Brien, but already I knew instinctively how to lift my blue eyes to those male faces and get what I wanted.

That's where I met Jethridge. He gave me cinnamon jaw-breakers and dizzying, heart-stopping rides on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. In one truck yard, around the store, and back through the other yard. Most of the truckers were too old for the army, but Jethridge was youth and laughter and swaggering masculinity in a black leather jacket studded with bright nailheads and chips of red glass. He made a pet of me, and as I ran through the lane, jumped the ditch, and darted across the cement road, I always hoped he'd be there, back from Nashville, Atlanta, or Lexington.

He was there the day after Daddy's perfume came, and when I tripped on the doorsill

and fell sprawling on the planked floor with a skinned knee, it was Jethridge who picked me up and took me home.

He placed me on the back of his glittering machine as if I were a princess and I clasped him tightly around his waist and laid my cheek against the cold leather of his jacket. It smelled of motor oil and hair tonic as we roared along the highway. He throttled down as we came to the end of our long driveway into the yard, but Mama heard and came out onto the porch.

"Carry me," I coaxed and was swooped up in his arms again. For one aching moment, I longed for my own daddy; then Mama was there with worried questions as Jethridge carried me into the house.

She removed a splinter and cleaned my knee, but before she could ease him out of the house with polite dismissive thanks, I put on my prissiest Watson manners, which always amused her. "You must allow us to repay your courtesy, Jethridge."

That was the first time, and if Sadie didn't approve of serving coffee to leather-jacketed truck drivers in our living room, she kept it to herself.

Or tried to.

Jethridge must have noticed, though, for when he stopped by to ask how I was the next day,

it was after Sadie had gone.

Mama sparkled that afternoon, gayer than I'd seen her since Daddy left, and her dimples flashed when Jethridge said, "Now I see where Libby gets her charm." I made him tell her my favorite trucking stories, and Mama laughed as much as I did.

I was central and necessary those first few days until the phone call about Uncle Paul made Mama cry. When I returned from the store with my candy, something in the relationship had shifted—a sudden tension in the air which didn't include me. Later, though, as I lay in bed, their voices floated up the stairwell and I could hear Mama's careless laughter and the familiar swagger in Jethridge's tones. The whole house seemed to drift on a sea of warm June roses and I fell asleep reassured.

April set a new pattern for our days: Mama no longer let me go to the store, but Jethridge made up for it by spending most of his layover times with us. Soon after Sadie left each day, we'd hear the pop of his motorcycle and I'd race across our wide porch and down the steps to fling myself upon him and rifle his pockets for the jawbreakers he kept stashed for me. Then he'd swing me up be-

hind him, and we'd roar through the old bridle paths, avoiding Sadie's cottage on the far side of the land, to end up in a skid by the porch where Mama waited with mocking laughter. "Four-year-olds, the both of you!"

At first Mama refused to ride behind him. "It's not ladylike," she protested; or, "Can you imagine what Sadie would say if she saw me?"

We hooted at the thought of Sadie's face, but Jethridge teased her and eventually she even managed to ride alone—never very expertly, but she could wobble down to the end of our long drive, circle awkwardly, and return without falling. She was so competent with the little red coupe Daddy had given her when I was born that I couldn't understand her ineptitude, but Jethridge seemed charmed and corrected her mistakes indulgently. Then Mama would shrug prettily and declare that only a man could handle such a monstrous machine.

Late in April, he left for a four-day haul to Nashville, and as Mama and I waved goodbye from the porch, I squeezed her hand and said, "Aren't you glad I found Jethridge? You're not lonesome any more, are you?"

She jerked her hand away with a strange look, then kneel-

ing beside me and talking very fast, she explained that Jethridge was my friend—she let him visit only because I liked him so much. Did I understand? Her hands hurt as she grasped my shoulders, and I nodded, too scared by her sudden intensity to speak.

Mama changed after that. The house no longer smelled of warm roses. Spring was upon us and soon Daddy would be home again, but I felt confused and often caught Mama looking at me as if I were about to do something horrible.

Jethridge changed, too. He still came, but he had no laughter and no time for me. I was turned out of the house to play in the sun or hide myself under the Cape Jessamine bushes and brood on what I'd done to make them hate me.

One early May night, a roll of thunder from a spring storm awakened me. It sounded like Nazi bombers, and I'd just opened my door to go to Mama when I heard her voice, no longer low and sweet but edged with the new sharpness she used on me. Jethridge's words were soft and coaxing but hers shrilled above them. "Leave all this for some white-trash bungalow while you're on the road half of your life? Don't be as childish as Libby!"

Lightning flashed outside as

matching anger rose in his voice. I crept back to bed, pulled the covers over my head to shut out both storms, and wished that the next roll of thunder really would be Nazi bombers so Jethridge could be brave and rescue us and make Mama like him again.

I must have dozed off, because when next I sat up in bed, all was quiet downstairs. The rain had dwindled to a steady drizzle, but I heard the sound of Mama's car as lights swept briefly across my bedroom ceiling. From my window, I heard the motor go silent in the drive below and the door quietly open and close. I waited to hear her come up the porch steps but long minutes passed. Suddenly I realized that Jethridge, too, must have been there in the dark shadows beyond her car, for I heard his Harley-Davidson splutter several times before catching.

Kneeling by the window, I saw its red taillight wobble unsteadily down our long straight drive and disappear in the rain.

And still Mama did not appear.

At last I crept out to the landing, feeling strange and lonely. Viewed through the railings, the big rooms below were shadowy and frightening in their emptiness, and one of Grandmother Watson's Chinese lamps

was lying on the floor, its silk shade torn and the bulb splintered upon the rug.

I huddled on the landing, afraid to go down and even more afraid to go back to my dark room. I must have slept again because Mama woke me as she was tucking me into my own bed. I clung to her, sobbing, and felt her hair hanging in cold wet strings like a soaked floor mop. Her cool skin smelled faintly of gasoline.

"You left me," I sobbed. "You and Jethridge went away and I was all alone."

"Little goose," she soothed. "Jethridge left *hours* ago; right after you went to bed. And I didn't leave you. I just ran outside to bring in the lawn chair cushions before the rain spoiled them."

"But the lamp," I quavered, confused. "I didn't break it, Mama. It was just lying there. Honest."

"There's nothing wrong with the lamp. You've had a bad dream. You always have bad dreams when it thunders. Remember? Go back to sleep now and forget all about it."

In the bright sunlight of morning, the night's strangeness really did seem like a bad dream. The Chinese lamp was in its accustomed place, bulb intact; and if there was a neatly mended tear in the silk shade,

well, many things had been repaired instead of replaced during the endless war.

By the time Sadie arrived that morning, Mama had begun a sudden orgy of spring cleaning. Even after Sadie left, Mama kept cleaning, and Jethridge did not come.

That afternoon I sneaked over to the store with the last pennies he'd given me. Afterwards, Mama heard me crying under the Cape Jessamines. At the store they'd talked of Jethridge's death—how his beautiful Harley-Davidson must have skidded at that bad curve on Ridge Road during the thunderstorm and plunged down the hillside. A terrible accident, they said. Just terrible.

Mama's hand clenched my arm as I sobbed out my news. One of her pretty red fingernails was broken into the quick and I remembered that it was broken like that when she soothed away my bad dream. Yet as soon as I told her what the men said about Jethridge's terrible accident, the tightness went out of her fingers and she forgot to spank me for going to the store.

By the time Daddy came home, she was almost her old self; but if her face froze when I was prattling to my father, then I would choose my words with care.

Fear that she would tell him whatever it was that I'd done wrong those past few months made me avoid any references to that time and I buried Jethridge so deeply that only the smell of sun-warmed roses could—

"Aren't you going?" asks Beth from the doorway and before I think, I hiss, "What are you doing here, you sneaking little—"

Suddenly everything snaps back into focus.

"Sorry, honey," I smile. "I was daydreaming and you startled me."

She hugs me in relief. We find the toy she came back for and I kiss her goodbye again.

So that's all it was!

Poor stupid Mama! How incredibly careless to let a four-year-old witness her one shabby little affair. But what a stroke of luck for her that Jethridge was killed when their romance turned sour, before Sadie found out for sure. Remembering the man's swaggering confidence, I doubt if he'd have let Mama go back to being a proper Wat-

son wife without a messy scandal.

If it weren't so pathetic, I could almost laugh with relief to know finally, after so many years of wondering, that the coldness between Mama and me wasn't something Beth and I need ever endure.

I'll have to be careful, though, about lashing out at Beth like that again. She's not me and I'm not Mama, but neither is she a baby any more. I mustn't let her become puzzled or uneasy—she and Carter are much too close.

I glance at the diamond-rimmed watch Carter gave me on our fifth anniversary. Nearly four. Already?

Carter expects me at seven. Even if I hurry, I'll only have two hours with Mitch and he'll probably spend most of it sulking and going on and on about how I put my reputation above his love. He's really getting tiresome. I could almost wish *he* had a Harley-Davidson so I could . . .

Oh my sweet Jesus!

Mama?

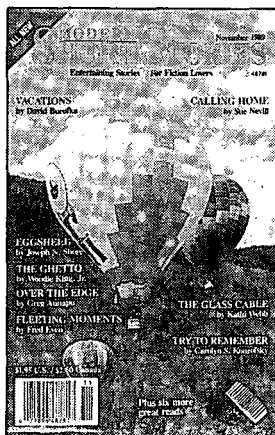
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Repo Joe

by
Elana
Lore



Basically, the only thing I like about Standley is his signature on my paychecks. I wasn't overjoyed about having to see his runty little cigar-chomping face every day, but my leg hurt like hell

where the bullet had gone through it, and even the painkillers didn't help much, so I'd been working in the office since I had come back. I was so tired of it I didn't care about the pain any more. I needed some action.

Standley could tell I was unhappy. He had been slinking around nervously all morning. I had just decided to go tell him I wanted to roll again when the phone rang. I saw him slip out the side door as I picked up the receiver.

"Hey, welcome back, *cholino*. How's the leg?" It was Alicia from the dealership down the street.

"Aw, shoot, Miss Scarlett, 'tweren't nuthin'. Just a scratch."

"Be serious."

"I am. It's still attached to the rest of me." I took a sip of my coffee. "Want to see my scar?"

"Not if it's where I think it is."

"Too bad. It's the chance of a lifetime. So, what's up?"

Alicia sighed on the other end of the phone. "I've got some heat for you. A Corliss GT—loaded."

"Yeah?" I said.

I could hear her shuffling papers. "Guy did a Playhouse 90 on us."

"Sounds like somebody's under the bus."

"Yeah—me, if we don't get the car back. It's my heat."

"Okay, I'm on it. Personally."

"Thanks. By the way, seeing as how you're disabled, I sent the lot guy over with the keys. Is he there yet?"

I looked out the plate glass

windows. The street was deserted, except for a couple of palm trees swaying in the breezes and a tall black man walking purposefully toward the door, eyeballing the scenery like he was new in town. "Does he look like Dobbin, only a few shades darker?"

"Yeah. His name's Bowie."

"He's on his way. What's the scoop on the Corliss?"

"The usual Sunday night credit bandit, I guess." I never understood why, but car dealerships are open Sunday evenings, after TRW closes, and they actually sell cars without a credit check if the buyer looks okay. I can't complain—it gives us extra business.

"Somebody got by you? *Pobrecita*."

"Yeah. He looked okay, and he was dressed nice. He said he had his own business, and his car got stolen last week. He gave me a check for a grand, but Marcy at the bank says he's down to spare change."

"Did you talk to him about bringing the car back?"

"Yeah, yesterday. He said his secretary screwed up the accounts, and he was going to fix it. I called again this morning. His business phone's been disconnected and his home phone doesn't answer."

"Give me the listings."

She read off a business ad-

dress and phone number in Del Mar, and a home one in Peñasquitos. I entered them in my computer.

"The business number checks out, but the residential's listed as a C. Hendricks in University City."

"That little liar."

"It's probably his girlfriend. Only women living alone list themselves under their initial."

"I'll remember that."

While we had been talking, Bowie had arrived and stood towering over me. He was about six feet, fighter's build, dark-skinned. He was wearing a pair of faded, grease-stained jeans over heavy work boots. It looked as if he'd been doing some kind of heavy construction lately.

"So, you want me to pull the car?"

"Yeah. Even if he does make good on the check, I can't get him financed."

"Okay."

"Gotta go now, crip. Bowie still there?"

"Yeah."

"He sounds like he needs some extra cash, so keep him in mind if you're short-handed, okay?"

"Your wish is my command."

I hung up and turned to face Bowie, grimacing as I caught my leg on the corner of the desk. I rose a little bit and stuck out my hand. "José Camacho,

better known as Joe Cho. You Bowie?"

"Yeah. Bowie Randall. Don't get up, man," he said. "I heard you took a bullet. I just brought you some keys."

His voice was soft and deep, with some kind of accent I couldn't place.

"Thanks. Alicia told me you were looking for some action. You done repo before?"

"Nah. You need a whole lot of experience?"

It was just a question, nothing behind it, so I shrugged and let it pass.

"Can you get bonded?"

"Yeah. No problem."

"I'll see what we can do when Standley needs some help."

"Thanks."

All the teams were out rolling, which meant there wasn't anybody to relieve me at lunchtime. I ordered a pizza that arrived almost cold, ate half, and wrapped the rest to take home for dinner.

I worked the phones pretty hard until Standley came back, which wasn't until almost three, but I didn't get any leads on the Corliss bandit. His name was John Schroeder, which didn't ring any bells with me. We got some guys we visit two or three times a year. Standley tried to slime his way past me into his office, but I blocked him.

"You ever heard of giving a guy a lunch break?" I snarled at him.

"I thought Mick . . ."

"You thought nothing. If this is the way you're gonna treat me, I'm going back out on the street."

Standley looked around nervously, but the office was empty.

"Fine. You do that," he said weakly.

"Starting tomorrow," I said.

"Sure, Joe. Whatever you want. I'll get someone else to work the desk."

I smiled as I walked back to my desk, and hoped Standley couldn't see my reflection in the plate glass window.

The usual routine when we're rolling is I pick up Dobbin at the bus stop around the corner from his ma's house at seven—he doesn't have a car—and we meet the Creeper at this doughnut shop down by Balboa Park. I don't know where he lives; sometimes I think maybe he hangs out in the park at night.

We eat and grab some coffee to take with us, then we prowl around the airport parking lots for a while, and head into the shop about eight thirty to see if there's any new heat.

Standley doesn't like the three of us together so much—he thinks if we had three cars out

we could pull more—but we've been proving him wrong for so long he hardly mentions it any more, except when business is slow.

The way we work when we're on the road is I handle the car phone and the wheels, Dobbin hotwires when we have to and acts as a general menace to society, and the Creeper keeps the heat sheet. He doesn't really need to look at it much—he's got a photographic memory for license plate numbers, which always makes me think he must have done time.

We had a couple of new cars on our sheet, so we did the usual home and office check to see if the people were stupid enough to leave the car lying around. These two weren't. It looked like I was going to have to call them and ask them nicely to bring the cars back. Sometimes, when you do that, they get nervous about where they stashed it and move it, and all you gotta do is follow them.

Mostly that doesn't work. And once you let them know you're after them, they really go underground. Not to mention that sometimes they get pissed off at you for stealing their wheels back and take it out on you, which is why Dobbin has a couple of fake teeth and I have a bullet hole that might have been a sex change operation if

the guy had had better aim.

I explained to Dobbin and the Creeper about Alicia's Corliss bandit, and we took 805 up to University City to see if Schroeder had hidden the car at his girlfriend's house. The address was a nice bunch of condos nestled in the side of a hill just below the shopping center. We did a couple of rounds in the parking lot, watching kids stumble out and head in little packs for school, dragging lunch boxes behind them, but the car wasn't there.

I decided to call and see if I could flush somebody out of the roost. We pulled into a vacant parking space right outside the Hendricks unit, where I could see into the downstairs windows. I dialed the number, deciding at the last minute to do my *L.A. Law* act.

"Is this Miss Hendricks?" I asked.

"Mmmm. Who's this?" she mumbled.

"This is Victor Sifuentes. John Schroeder said I could get in touch with him through you."

She was more awake now. I liked it when they thought they recognized the name, but weren't sure where they had heard it before.

"John?" she said, surprised. "He isn't here."

"Please have him call my office. He has the number."

As I hung up the phone, I heard her say something else, but I didn't catch it. Dobbin was staring blankly at the phone, while the Creeper was checking out the cars in the parking lot. We waited for some signs of life but nothing happened, so we decided to go back to our heat sheet.

We got lucky fast. The Creeper I.D.'d a Toyota we'd been carrying for almost a week in a grocery store parking lot. Dobbin hotwired it and took it in.

Then, about ten minutes later, we found an XZ convertible parked out in front of the guy's house. He must have gotten careless, I guess. We'd been looking for that car for a while. I called the police dispatch number and gave them the details while the Creeper dug around in his bag for the master key. You can't be too careful with the Creeper. He's been busted for grand theft auto on a two mile trip back to the lot. He's just got that kind of face.

That left me alone for a while. I wanted to check out Schroeder's office anyway, so I radioed in that Dobbin and the Creeper were on their way back and I'd pick them up in an hour.

Del Mar's not that far north on 805, and it's a pretty stretch of highway. Right past the turnoff was a long, low row of high-tech offices—the kind with

tinted windows that look like giant sunglasses. The landscapers had left colorful rows of pansies and dianthus behind to assure visitors they were still inside the boundaries of civilization, even though the area was ringed with scrub grass and the rocky debris of some ancient volcanic uprising.

The parking lot looked freshly poured and painted, and most of the cars parked there were fairly new. It was a very upwardly mobile kind of place. I pulled into a spot marked RESERVED, JOHN SCHROEDER, and turned off the engine.

The door in front of me said SCHROEDER ENGINEERING. Very fancy. I got out and knocked on it, then tried the handle. It was open.

It was dark in the office, and after the bright light outside, I couldn't see. I fumbled for the light switch but couldn't find it. I heard the sound of something heavy hitting the floor, and footsteps, and then something hit me hard and I went down on my bum leg. I tried to stifle a scream, but couldn't. I felt a breeze as the door slammed. Whoever had hit me was gone.

I lay there for a couple of minutes, doing the Lamaze breathing that the nurse at the hospital had assured me would ease the pain, and when my eyes adjusted to the dim inter-

rior, I saw that Schroeder's office had been trashed. The file drawers had been emptied and rooted through, the desk was littered with papers—even the coffeepot had been torn apart.

I decided to look around. The office was long and narrow, with a formal executive office set up beyond the secretarial alcove, and beyond that, what looked like some kind of studio. The formal office area was decorated in some kind of light wood, with pastel carpet and walls. There was less damage here—lamps broken and pictures torn off the walls. It looked like Schroeder hadn't used the area much except for decoration, and whoever had just left had figured that out.

The studio was where the noise had come from. It was apparently where Schroeder worked. It had a drafting table, plastic storage containers against the walls, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Drafting paper was wadded up in little balls all over the floor and the storage containers had been emptied of their supplies. The only thing that hadn't been touched was a six-pack of Vernor's ginger ale that was sitting on the kitchen counter. The guy at least had some sense.

I got a clean glass out of the kitchen cabinet, some ice out of the refrigerator, and opened a

soda. I love the stuff.

I rooted around through the papers a little bit until I finished my drink, but all I found were some weird drawings that looked like they were for electrical stuff.

I heard a door slam and walked cautiously to the service entrance to the studio. Next door, a UPS truck was backing up. The driver nodded in my direction when he saw me. As the truck rolled down the delivery drive, I saw the glint of blue metal beyond it. This is too easy, I thought.

I propped the back door open with a stapler so I wouldn't get locked out and went to investigate. The info on the receipt of sale in the front window matched what Alicia had given me on the telephone. I got the Creeper on the radio, told him I'd found the Corliss and was bringing it in. He said he'd hitch a ride up with one of the other units, bring my car in, then meet me at the impound lot.

The car still smelled new, the stereo was top of the line, and aside from the ache in my leg when I shifted gears, I was in heaven. I eased into traffic and popped the clutch into overdrive. A guy could get used to this, I thought to myself.

I stuck a piece of chewing gum in my mouth and opened

the ashtray to ditch the wrapper. Something inside rattled. I felt around, got a grip on it, and pulled it out. It was some kind of little plastic gizmo with wires in it—probably a piece of the car's electrical system that the installers at the dealership had forgotten to hook up. I put it in my pocket to turn in at the lot.

I couldn't wait to show Alicia, so I decided to pull into the dealership on the way to our impound lot. She was standing on the stairs by the front door, going over some kind of list with Bowie. I honked the horn and they came over.

"Hey, fast work," Alicia said. "Where was it?"

"In the parking lot behind his office. Piece of cake."

"Did Schroeder give you any trouble?" Alicia asked.

"He wasn't there." I was about to explain what had happened, but Bowie stopped me.

"Gimme the keys for a minute, Joe," he said. He had a puzzled look on his face.

"Sure." I handed them over. "Is something wrong?"

"There's something sticking out of the trunk."

Alicia walked back and peered down. "It looks like a suit jacket. Maybe it's Schroeder's dry cleaning," she joked.

Bowie turned the key in the lock and the trunk sprang open.

He jumped back and turned his head away from the sight.

Inside, squeezed around so his face was practically between his knees, was the body of a man. Alicia turned pale and was starting to gag. One of the salesmen was walking over, smiling, to see what was going on.

"Could you shut that thing, Bowie?" Alicia asked.

I was starting to feel a little green around the gills, too. Bowie slammed the lid.

"I guess we ought to call the cops," I said.

"I'll do it," Alicia said. "Maybe we should move the car around back."

Bowie glanced at me and held up the keys. "No, go ahead," I said. We were on his turf.

The cops who arrived first were uniforms. I watched from inside the employee lounge as Alicia walked them to the back lot and explained what had happened. The cops opened the trunk, made faces, and shut it again.

I hobbled out to join them. One of the cops had gone back to his unit to radio for intelligent life, while the other was looking at Alicia as if he'd been stranded on a desert island since puberty. Alicia was starting to look irritated. She saw me approach and rolled her eyes.

"This is Joe Camacho," she said. "He pulled the car."

The officer was young, blond, tanned, fit—a beach bunny, maybe, or a male model, but not my idea of a cop. His gold nametag reflected the sunlight, wavering. I stared at his shirt for a while, finally made out the name: Warner.

I gave him my name and address, and Standley's, as a sort of reference. Then I went and sat down in the shack where Bowie does business, on the three-and-a-half-legged Formica castoff that passed for his guest chair.

The two cops were back over by the car, guarding it, I guess, until they were relieved. Bowie had his feet propped up on his desk, going over invoices and watching the action outside.

"So, what do you think?" he asked, tilting his head toward the Corliss.

"I think it probably wasn't a suicide," I said. "Why?"

"I dunno. You see a white guy come in here, dressed nice, looks like he's probably got a house in the 'burbs, coupla kids, swimming pool in the back yard. He gets himself killed and stuffed into the trunk of a car. What did he do? Get caught cheatin' on his wife? Forget to pay his taxes? No, man. What we got here is some high-class drama."

Two cars pulled up outside—the reinforcements. We got up to investigate and were put through the twenty-questions routine again by a plainclothesman while a guy dusted the car for prints and a tiny girl who couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds took photos of the guy in the trunk.

A few minutes later a wagon from the coroner's office arrived, and a few minutes after that, a news truck from one of the networks.

The plainclothes cop who talked to us was a *cholo* named Miggy Hernandez I used to deal with on the phone back when he was in auto theft. He was an okay guy.

He herded us back into Bowie's shack when he saw the news truck and asked us not to talk to anyone but him. He slipped a leather card case out of his pocket and handed each of us a card with his San Diego P.D. number on it.

As he was leaving, one of the guys from the coroner's office walked up and said, "He's been pronounced. You want us to take him so you can dust the trunk?"

Hernandez looked around. The fingerprint guy and the tiny photographer seemed to be done. "Yeah. Get him out of here before the cameras are set up, if you can. Any I.D. on him?"

"Driver's license in his wallet. Says his name was John Schroeder. The photo pretty much matches."

"Anything interesting?"

"His pockets were rifled, but nothing was taken, looks like. Money's still there."

"I'll send Robbie down to the morgue when he's done here to see if he can lift any prints off the stuff. How soon can you have the report?"

The guy from the coroner's office glanced over at the news truck, then back to Hernandez. Bowie and I were pretending to be real busy doing paperwork in the shack. "We'll put a priority on it."

Hernandez and his partner watched the loading of the body, then talked to the reporters. Meanwhile, I got the Creeper on the phone and told him what was going down. He said he'd cover for me for the rest of the day. Alicia showed up a few minutes later, called the general manager and told him she and Bowie were splitting due to general shock and trauma, and to avoid giving the dealership any bad publicity by accidentally talking to the reporters milling around. He went for it. The three of us drove down to a little Mexican restaurant to have a couple of beers. It ended up being an all-evening thing, with dinner and then a trip out to Mission Bay for ice cream

and a walk on the beach.

We talked about everything except the dead guy, and as the evening progressed, I decided I liked Bowie. He was quiet, but he had a good sense of humor. It wasn't until I got home to my apartment about midnight and got into bed that what he had said earlier about Schroeder started rolling around in my head. What could a white-bread kind of guy like Schroeder have done to get offed like that?

Thursday, Bowie and I had our names in the paper. Standley kept me and the guys out on the road most of the day, I guess to cut down on the rehash with the other teams, which was fine by me. I'd had a little too much excitement in my life lately.

I didn't get home until around seven. The minute I walked in the door I knew something was wrong—someone had been there while I was out. Nothing seemed out of place, but I could smell garlicky body odor and maybe cheap cigar hanging in the apartment.

I checked around but nothing was missing, which made me think right away that this was somehow connected to Schroeder. I didn't know how or why, but whoever had been tossing Schroeder's office when I had walked in now thought I had what he'd been looking for.

I opened a beer and turned on the Padres game to help me think. Should I call Miggy Hernandez? Nah. He'd probably think I was nuts or, worse, some kind of wimp. There was only one thing I could do. I showered, changed, and went back out.

"Who is it?" The voice sounded a little scared.

"It's Joe Camacho. I'm the guy who found John Schroeder's body in the car." Apparently she knew he was dead. She didn't seem surprised. I like people who keep up on current events.

"What do you want?"

"Schroeder's office was tossed when I went there yesterday to look for the car, and today, someone broke into my apartment. Schroeder listed this address on his credit app for the car, and I was hoping you could tell me what's going on."

I heard the latch click and the door opened the length of the chain.

"Let's see some I.D."

Her hands trembled as she took my driver's license and Standley's I.D. card.

A moment later the door shut, then opened wide. C. Hendricks was a tall blonde with the deep brown eyes of a frightened doe. She ushered me into a kitchen that was larger than I expected and motioned me to a bar stool at the center island. She offered

me a soda, and while she was pouring it, she said, "He listed my address? Why?"

"Beats me." I shrugged as she handed me the glass and sat down. "Were you his girlfriend?"

"No. His secretary—up until Monday. He told me he was leaving town for a while and wouldn't need me any more." Something seemed to be bothering her. Finally, she said, "What really happened to John?"

"I don't know much. I just brought the car in; the body was in the trunk. The cops were talking about a bullet wound, but I don't know where he was shot."

"Oh."

"What did he actually do up there in that office? I couldn't tell."

"I don't really know. He was supposed to be a toy designer, but I never saw him do anything."

"I saw drawings in his studio."

"Yeah. There's a two-month-old coffee stain on the top one. That's how I caught on that he wasn't actually working."

"How did he spend his time?"

"He was out a lot. When he was there, he was mostly on the phone."

"With who?"

"I don't know. I don't speak Spanish. Most of the guys who

called seemed to be Mexican."

"He spoke Spanish?"

"Yeah. I started thinking he was maybe smuggling drugs or something. And then, when his car got stolen, he got really scared. I had just about decided to start looking for another job when he told me he was going away. I was getting really nervous about all the weird stuff that was going on."

"Did he say where he was planning on going?"

"No."

"How about the guys he talked to on the phone—do you remember any of their names?"

"One. A guy named Enrique Moreno. He and John were back and forth on the phone a lot lately."

"You wouldn't happen to remember his phone number, would you?"

"No. But it was long distance. I dialed it a couple of times for John. It would be on his phone bills at the office."

She hesitated for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. She left the room and came back a few minutes later with a piece of paper and a key in her hand. "Here. This is John's home address and the key to the office. I never gave it back to him." She paused and looked me in the eye. "Whatever happens, I don't want to be involved, okay?"

I nodded, even though I had no idea what I was agreeing to.

I decided to check out Schroeder's house. I thought about jacking the lock to see what was inside, but there was an unmarked police car parked down by the street corner, which changed my mind for me. I wondered how Miggy was doing on the case, and tried to remember what I'd told him about Schroeder. Even if I hadn't mentioned C. Hendricks to him, surely he would have picked up on the phone number on the credit app and checked it out. Maybe not—she hadn't mentioned the police being there to question her. I decided to ask Alicia to call Miggy in the morning and tell him. She could do it tactfully.

The sunglass windows of Schroeder's building looked droopy and wavy in the light from the street lamp. The parking lot was deserted. I was starting to have some doubts. Had Miggy and his friends been here and decided there wasn't anything useful? Was I barking up the wrong tree?

I was in and out in a couple of minutes with no problem. The only thing different about the office was that there was fingerprint dust all over the place, which restored my faith in the San Diego Police De-

partment. The phone bills had been in the mess of papers near the file cabinet in the front office. It didn't take a genius to find them.

By midnight, I had a list of four numbers that Schroeder had called frequently. One was a toll number in San Diego that was hooked to a squeaky-voiced kid's answering machine, complete with *Star Trek* music in the background. The kid said his name was Don Gervase. The second was a long-distance number that gave commodities quotes. Gold and silver were down; platinum was up. The third was an exchange that I recognized as being in Tijuana. The sexy female voice that answered on the recording said in both Spanish and English that La Marqueta was closed for the day and would open promptly at nine the next morning. The fourth number was answered by a gravelly-voiced man whose accent sounded more Puerto Rican than Mexican. I didn't recognize the exchange, but I knew the number was somewhere on the Baja Peninsula.

The next morning, early, I persuaded Alicia to use her contacts at the phone company to find out who the Puerto Rican voice belonged to. Then I called Bowie and asked him if he wanted to take a little trip across the border to Tijuana. He

said he'd see if he could switch shifts with the evening guy and call me back. While I waited, I ate some really disgusting bran cereal and decided I'd go back to churritos and doughnuts and the hell with being healthy.

Alicia confirmed what I suspected—the number belonged to Enrique Moreno, and the exchange was a Rosarita one.

Once Bowie gave me the okay, I called in sick, then met Bowie at Dobbin's bus stop so I could give him the car. Dobbin looked nervous driving off by himself in my wheels, and I felt like I was sending a kid off to his first day of school. I don't know how he and the Creeper managed while I was in the hospital.

I explained what was up to Bowie while he drove south. There wasn't very much traffic, so we crossed the border fast. The main tourist drag was already crowded, but we didn't have much trouble finding a parking space. I bought myself a bottle of Kahlua and some tequila añejo with a worm in it for Bowie. He thought I was kidding about the worm. He'd find out soon enough. I taught Bowie how to haggle for stuff, and he got a pretty good deal on a donkey piñata for Dobbin. I also bought the Creeper a thick blanket, just in case he really does sleep in the park.

By then it was almost lunch-

time, and we decided to go out to La Marqueta and see if we could hustle up some information. It was out past the airport, near Otay, in a cluster of long, low adobe buildings. There were a couple of dusty stores and a faded building with a crooked, hand-painted sign that said ROSA'S CANTINA—CERVEZA. The parking lots were full of old beaters with blue Mexican license plates.

We parked outside Rosa's and went in to have lunch. It was still early, and the place was nearly empty. Rosa herself was there. She was short and stout, with high, flat cheekbones and orange-clay skin. She was a talker—actually, a complainer—and it didn't take long for me to find out that La Marqueta was a *maquiladora* that made electronic parts for Anglo companies, and that Enrique Moreno, who ran the place, was a slick Nuyorican with fancy clothes who didn't pay his workers well enough for all the money he was making. Bowie sort of nodded in the right places and pretended he was following what was going on. I'd never asked him if he spoke any Spanish.

It turned out he does, a little. He told me Nuyorican wasn't an insult—it was just what Puerto Rican New Yorkers called themselves. And I ex-

plained to him that a *maquiladora* was a factory where Anglo companies got parts made at cheap Mexican wages with no union hassles.

"You think there's something fishy going on at the *maquiladora*?" Bowie asked as I gave him directions to the Otay crossing.

"Probably not," I said. "Customs is really tough on those shops. But it's got to have some connection to what's going on."

As usual, I had trouble at the border. I know customs has to be careful, but I always end up feeling like I'm crossing illegally, which is why I don't go to Tijuana much any more. I showed my driver's license and Standley's I.D., and finally they let me through.

When we were back on the highway, Bowie smiled and said, "That was a really interesting experience, man."

"You like Mexico?"

"Nah. I like the way they let a brother in, no problem, but you they hassle."

"Yeah? Let's try crossing the Alabama border sometime and see what happens."

Bowie chuckled.

Neither one of us had any particular plans for the afternoon, so we decided to get some carry-out food and eat in Balboa Park. We watched a pickup game some teenage boys were

having on the lawn and talked about what we had come up with so far.

When I told Bowie about how Schroeder's office had been torn up, he pointed out to me that if they had trashed the coffeepot, they were probably looking for something small. I hadn't thought of that before. But that was as far as we got.

I don't understand Dobbin or the Creeper. They got it into their heads that I was really sick, so they both showed up in the car and the four of us ended up going back to my place to have a few beers. They stayed until about midnight, and after they left, I realized how much I had had to drink that day and how much weird food I had eaten. I got the cleaning bucket out from under the sink and put it by the bed, then prayed that I would live until morning before I fell on the mattress.

It was my worst nightmare—the kind that could make you use birth control forever. When I woke up, a sweaty, wheezy, overweight asthmatic kid with thick black glasses held together by masking tape was standing over me, peering at me through milky blue eyes.

I stared at him for a moment through narrowed eyes that were trying to focus.

"I said I want my toy back," the kid said.

"Ay, *Dios*. Why me?" I said, staring at the ceiling. "I don't have any toys. Since you let yourself into my apartment, you can probably tell I don't have any kids, either. What I do have is a terrible hangover, so go away."

The fat kid crossed his arms and looked at me stubbornly. "No."

"At least go blow your nose, then," I said. "Your wheezing is giving me a headache."

He looked around. "In the bathroom," I said. "And it would be better if I didn't have to hear you do it."

I tried to sit up. The fat kid came back out, sounding a lot less noisy, and said, "It really stinks in here. You smell like a brewery."

"And you are going to be dead soon if you keep bothering me," I said.

He peered at me for a minute. "I know how to make coffee," he said finally.

I had my doubts, but I was a desperate man.

"I tell you what. You make coffee and I'll take a shower."

"Okay."

When I got out of the shower, a steaming cup of coffee was sitting on the bathroom sink. He hadn't lied. It was better than the stuff I make. I drank

it while I dressed and went out to the kitchen to get another cup.

The kid was sitting on the living room floor with pieces of my television set scattered around him.

"What in God's name are you doing to my TV?" I shouted.

"Fixing it. It's a compulsion of mine. I couldn't get Channel 2, and the cartoons are about to come on."

I sighed and got another cup of coffee. This was the kind of kid even a mother would probably leave in the desert, or at least send out to play on the freeway. He was making me loco. Then I thought, well, if he can make coffee, maybe he can fix TV's.

"I'm finished," he called out. "See?"

I looked. The picture was terrific. "How about the others?"

He flipped through with the remote button. They were all clearer.

"Want me to rig you into cable?" he said.

"Isn't that slightly illegal?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Sort of. I just wanted to see if you thought I could do it."

"Okay. I believe you. Now, who are you, and what makes you think I have your toy?"

"My name is Don Gervase. Have you ever heard of me?"

"No. Should I have?" I remembered his voice from the answering machine.

"I created the Gervase Greeks."

"What are they?"

"Toys—computerized simulations of war games."

I raised my eyebrows—very carefully. "I'm impressed."

"Yeah?"

"You must be pretty smart."

He blushed. "I'm supposed to be some kind of boy genius. Too bad I can't convince my mother. She won't even let me drive." His shoulders slumped.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Oh. You still have baby fat. You need to exercise."

"Yeah, I know. But the asthma slows me down."

"Maybe if you make enough money with your toys, you can buy your own car."

"I made twelve million last year. She won't let me touch it until I'm twenty-one."

"Your mother sounds like a tough broad."

"Yeah."

"So, what is this missing toy of yours that you think I have?"

"Last year I designed this game, see? It's called the Trojan Horse. It was the top seller at Christmas, so the manufacturer wanted me to design another one that was even harder. You know, like, more compli-

cated. I finished the prototype last week, but before I could send it off to the manufacturer, it was stolen from my safe by this guy named John Schroeder."

"How do you know he stole it?"

"A guy I met at a science fiction convention last year told me about him. He hangs around guys like me, then goes off with their stuff. See, I had this problem with the Trojan Horse. Right after Christmas, another company ripped off the design and made knockoffs a lot cheaper, so I lost money I could have made. I didn't worry when Schroeder started hanging around and calling me up and stuff because I had put this self-destruct device on the prototype, and I had a camera rigged up in my safe. I have really good photos of him taking it."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"I'm already in trouble with my mom. I didn't want her to know it got stolen. She'd think I'm irresponsible, and then she'd never let me do anything."

"Oh. What made you think that I had it?"

"I talked to Cynthia Hendricks. She told me your apartment had been broken into. It made sense that if Schroeder's office was ransacked and he was killed there, it was by

somebody who was looking for the chip. But if your place was broken into right after the piece in the paper about how his body was found, then whoever did it hadn't found the chip and thought you had it."

"That's pretty good reasoning. How did you get to know Cynthia Hendricks?"

He looked uncomfortable. "She was always nice to me. I liked talking to her. When I found the office phone disconnected, I decided to call her at home. You know—see if she was all right."

I sensed there was more to it than that, but I didn't want to embarrass the kid.

"Anyway," he said, "I have to deliver the chip to my manufacturer by Tuesday, even if Schroeder already opened it and destroyed the coding. That part I can do over again."

"What was the coding part of it?"

"It was this light-sensitive ... oh, forget it. You wouldn't understand."

"I get it. The minute you expose the insides to light, they don't work any more."

"Yeah."

"Who was it who stole the Trojan Horse thing?"

"Anderson Toys. They're in L.A."

"Did they steal it from your house?"

"No. They just bought one and opened it up. Once it's on the market, everybody rips you off."

I was starting to get a sick feeling in my stomach. I stood up and took my wallet out of my back pocket. "Hey, kid, I need some time to think." I handed him a twenty. "Could you run down the street to McDonald's and get a bunch of Big Breakfasts or something?"

He looked suspicious. "I guess so."

"How did you get in here?"

"My mom's old VISA card. You need a better lock on that door."

"Yeah."

I lay down on the couch after he left and tried to piece everything together. Schroeder steals this toy design from the kid—Don. Maybe a buyer like Anderson sends him after it. What next? Schroeder gets greedy, decides to sell it to someone else, too, and tries to copy it. But suddenly he doesn't have anything to sell, so he what? Maybe he cleans out his accounts and decides to leave town? That sounded good to me.

But what next? I thought about it for a while, and managed to put myself to sleep in the process. The next thing I knew, the kid was standing over me with a big white bag in his hand, shaking me awake.

"You snore," he said.

"Only when I'm about to beat someone to death with my bare hands."

"You have a weird sense of humor."

While we ate, I explained what I had come up with.

"So, what you're saying is that if I hadn't booby-trapped Helen of Troy—that's the name of the toy—Schroeder wouldn't be dead."

"Probably not, but you shouldn't feel guilty about it. You didn't ask him to steal your toy. Helen of Troy? Does this thing have a lot of sex in it?"

The fat kid blushed. "Not exactly."

"So what does this toy look like?"

"It doesn't look like a toy. It's just the electronic components. The manufacturer is going to package it." He reached into his pocket and took out a Polaroid snapshot. "That's what it looks like."

I slumped in my chair. "Ay, Dios."

"What?"

"I've had your toy all along—I just didn't realize it."

"Where is it?"

"At the dry cleaner's, probably." It was all rushing back to me now—the little electronic part I had found in Schroeder's car ashtray and forgotten to return at the lot in the excitement

of discovering Schroeder's body in the trunk; the dirt on my jacket from my trip to the linoleum floor of Schroeder's outer office; the hasty trip to the cleaners on my way to work Thursday.

I fumbled for the car keys while Don Gervase looked on, worried. "Dry cleaning solution will destroy everything," he said. "How long have your clothes been there?"

"Two days," I said. "Don't worry. Mr. Lee always cleans out my pockets."

The kid turned kind of pale. "Have you ever heard of Murphy's Law?" he asked.

"Yeah." I got kind of a sick feeling again. This wouldn't be a good time for Mr. Lee to decide to take a vacation and leave some acne-faced gum chewer in charge of the place.

The kid moved faster than I thought he could and slammed the door as I pulled from the curb. We had to sit around and wait for twenty minutes until the cleaners opened. Mr. Lee is an elderly Chinese man who doesn't speak English very well, and has a hearing problem as well, so we had to repeat ourselves a couple of times before he understood what the fuss was about. He gave me my jacket back all right. I felt for the little toy, but it wasn't there.

"Ah! One moment," Mr. Lee said and walked to the back of the shop. He came back with a little paper lunch bag in his hand. "Shame, shame, Mr. Cho. You not clean out pockets again."

I opened the bag. Inside was about a dollar in change, a couple of phone messages from Standley's, and the kid's toy. We both heaved a sigh of relief. Mr. Lee must have thought we were nuts the way we carried on about the stuff in the paper bag, but he was polite, as always.

When we got back in the car, I said, "I have to take you home before your mom comes after me with a baseball bat or, worse, has me up on kidnapping charges."

He shoved his glasses back up on his nose. "She'd probably rather have a date with you if she saw you, so don't worry about the kidnapping charges."

I shuddered to think of what a date with his mother would be like, so I went on. "But first, we have to take a little trip down to police headquarters."

"Why?"

"Because there are a bunch of guys trying to figure out who murdered Schroeder, and why, and we have some answers."

The kid slumped down in his seat. "I'm going to get in a lot of trouble if my mom finds out."

"She doesn't have to. Here's how we can work it. You got your toy back. You talk to the police, I deliver you to the corner nearest your house, and you fix up Helen by Tuesday. All we've got to do is make the cops look good."

"How?"

"By giving them all the credit for figuring out this stuff."

Miggy Hernandez was at his desk, looking tired and depressed. He didn't seem too pleased to see us. I asked him in Spanish if he had time for a cup of coffee somewhere private and maybe a big lead on the Schroeder case, and he brightened up considerably.

"You got it."

We went to a little cafe a couple of blocks away that was full of ferns and empty of cops. The kid seemed pleased that we let him have coffee. I was starting to think his mother needed a good talking to by someone. Maybe Hernandez. He was married, last I heard, so he wouldn't have to worry about the fat kid fixing him up with his mom.

"You're the kid who designed the Trojan Horse?" Hernandez said when Don Gervase finished telling his story. "My kids love that thing. I thought you were older."

Yep. Hernandez was a done

deal on the talk with the mother.

"Are you sure you don't want some publicity—you know, about helping the police solve this case? Maybe your mother would take you more seriously," I said innocently.

The kid shoved his glasses back up his nose and looked at me suspiciously.

"We can work something out," Hernandez said expansively.

I decided to nail him a little tighter. I went on about how restrictive the fat kid's mother was until finally Hernandez said, "Okay, I'll fix it with the mother. Don't worry about it."

"Good," I said. "He's an okay kid, once you get used to him. Now, if you two don't need me any more, I'm going to go take some aspirin and sleep off the rest of this hangover."

"Take a shower while you're at it," Hernandez said. "You smell like a brewery."

I glared at him and the kid as I left.

The next few days I felt really jumpy, like I should be doing something, but I didn't know what. On Sunday I drove down to the beach and took a long walk, trying to get it out of my system, but all I ended up with was sore leg muscles. My doctor had told me to exercise the leg the bullet had gone through, but I

didn't think he meant for me to do a whole week's worth of walking in one afternoon. I didn't have to see him again until Thursday, so I tried to patch up the damage with a hot bath when I got home. It helped some, but I was still stiff when I went in to work on Monday morning.

Even Dobbin and the Creeper noticed that I was edgy, but they didn't say anything. The Creeper just sort of took over, giving me directions to places he wanted to check out, and Dobbin worked faster than usual to give us extra time on the road. I was really grateful—we would have gone back to Standley's empty-handed if it had been up to me.

Monday night I had a dream that Enrique Moreno had found out where Alicia lived and was stalking her to see if she had the chip. When I woke up, sweating, I realized that I didn't know what Moreno looked like.

The tension of not knowing what was going on, and not being able to do anything, was wearing on me. First thing Tuesday morning, when we rolled into Standley's for the new heat sheet, I picked up the phone and called Alicia.

She could tell something was wrong and set up a dinner for us and Bowie at the same place we'd gone to before. She said it

might help to talk it out.

It only got worse. All day I had the urge to call Miggy, the fat kid, even Cynthia Hendricks, but I managed to talk myself out of it. Miggy knew what he was doing—if he needed my help, he'd call me.

When I got to the restaurant about seven, Alicia and Bowie were already there. They had ordered a pitcher of beer and a bowl of tostados, and the waitress brought me a frosted glass when I sat down.

"Your leg still bothering you?" Bowie asked.

"I went for a little walk," I explained. I was limping pretty badly after sitting in the car all day. "I think I overdid it."

Alicia was in a good mood. She told me about this old guy who had come into the dealership right before she'd left and tried to pay cash for a car. He'd taken a huge wad of bills out of his pocket and started peeling them off, and nobody knew what to do. She'd finally had the cashier call the bank and check the serial numbers, just to make sure the money wasn't stolen. He'd turned out to be a harmless old guy who didn't trust banks. He didn't drive too well, either. Bowie said he'd had to close his eyes when the guy took the car off the lot, for fear he was going to total the inven-

tory on the way out.

There was always something weird happening at that dealership, and I started to relax as they told the story. We got another pitcher of beer and some more tostados, and I told them what had happened over the weekend on the Schroeder case, leaving out the part about my dream so I wouldn't worry Alicia.

We were just about to order dinner when Miggy Hernandez strolled in the door and came over to our table. "I've been looking for you," he said.

"How'd you ever find me here?" I asked.

"It's my job," he said with a small smile. "You can't escape from the long arm of the law."

"I'll remember that," I said.

Bowie reached out and pulled another chair up to the table for him. "We're just about to order. Want to stay for dinner?"

"Good idea," Hernandez said. "I'm glad you two are here, too. I came to tell Cho we arrested Enrique Moreno this morning." He winked at Alicia. "Cho gets real upset when things aren't wrapped up neat. One of these days, maybe I'll tell you some stories from the old days, back when I was in auto theft."

We ordered, and when the waitress left, Alicia said, "So, what happened?"

Hernandez chuckled. "I'd like

to tell you we did some real heavy duty detective work, but it didn't go down that way. Our computer did most of the work. John Schroeder turned out to be an industrial spy. He'd been working the San Diego-L.A. area for about four years and had decided it was time to move on—too many people in the business knew him. He'd been establishing a new identity as John Sheridan in New York for about six months, which is why his bank accounts here came up empty. He was transferring money to his new accounts back east. But he had made this deal with Moreno to steal a computer chip for a toy."

"I told them about the fat kid just before you got here," I interrupted.

"Good," Hernandez said. "That makes it easier. Anyway, the fat kid's chip was supposed to be his last job before he moved on. But he got greedy. He decided to duplicate it and sell it to a couple of other guys he'd done business with before, only when he opened the chip, he destroyed it. He realized he was going to have to leave town sooner than he'd thought."

"Did Moreno find out about the other guys Schroeder had sold the chip to?" Alicia asked.

Hernandez shrugged. "Maybe. But I doubt it. Those guys don't talk to each other. The way we

figured it, Moreno was on a tight production deadline. He had to get the chip in a hurry to get the toys done for the Christmas sales season, so he was bugging Schroeder to deliver, and Schroeder was probably putting him off. Moreno not only owns La Marqueta, the *maquiladora*, but he's a principal in Anderson Toys in L.A., so he was also involved in the Trojan Horse knockoff last year. It was a big coup for him to get the chip *and* to have his factory be the one to produce it. He would have made millions. I talked to a friend of mine on the force down there and found out that his factory was all geared up to produce something but they couldn't show my friend anything it was based on. They even had their promo pieces done.

"Moreno isn't talking, but I think he panicked when he found out Schroeder's phone had been disconnected and went up to his office to confront him."

"Why didn't Schroeder just give him the chip, even though it didn't work?" Bowie asked. "It would have bought him some time."

"Who knows?" Hernandez said. "I think Schroeder figured Moreno needed him alive until he had the chip, so he tried to put him off again. Moreno was probably thinking that Schroe-

der didn't plan on delivering the chip at all, so why not ice him, ditch the body somewhere it wouldn't be found for a while, and search Schroeder's home and office at his leisure."

"It never made sense to me," Alicia said, "that Schroeder would disconnect his phone. A dead giveaway that he was planning on splitting."

"I have this sister-in-law who doesn't believe in making long distance phone calls," Hernandez said. "She says they cost too much. She doesn't save money any other way, but you can't convince her to use the phone. It was probably some idiosyncrasy like that. He didn't think it through."

"Like the old guy who doesn't believe in using banks," I added.

We ate quietly, thinking about what Hernandez had told us. When we were about done, I said, "When was Schroeder killed?"

"The morning you found the body. Probably early. I would say before nine, when people arrived for work, since nobody heard the altercation or the shot. And Moreno had had time to tear up the office before you arrived."

"So he was the one who knocked me down when I got there?" I asked.

"Yeah. It would seem so," Hernandez said.

"I guess I was lucky. He must have still had the gun on him. He could just as easily have shot me."

Hernandez shrugged. "He didn't have any reason to. He must have known you couldn't see him, coming in from the bright sunlight like that, so it was a safe bet not to make things any worse by attracting attention as he left."

"How does the car fit in?" Alicia asked. "Was the old one really stolen?"

"I don't know," Hernandez said. "Moreno didn't have any reason to steal it—he wasn't suspicious yet—and Schroeder had no reason to switch cars, unless there was something else going on that we don't know about. The old car hasn't turned up yet. Aside from the inconvenience of not having wheels for a couple of days, it worked out okay for Schroeder. Getting a new car wasn't a bad idea. Moreno wouldn't recognize it, for one thing, and second, it would be a freebie. He'd be long gone by the time you figured out you'd been scammed and sent someone to repo the car. All he'd have to do once he got to New York was buy a junked Corliss, change over the VIN numbers, and register the new car under the serial number of the junker. Nobody'd be the wiser. It happens all the time."

"But we decided to pull the car two days after he bought it," Alicia said.

"Yeah. I think he was planning on being gone by then, but it didn't work out that way," Hernandez said. "He made a big deposit Tuesday afternoon to his New York account, so it looks like he stuck around to pick up some money from one of his other customers. That and not having a car for a few days slowed down his plans to leave town."

"What's going to happen to Moreno now?" Alicia asked.

"We found the gun he killed Schroeder with," Hernandez smiled. "He's a done deal for hard time."

"You seem pretty confident of that," I said.

Hernandez smiled mischievously. "Last I heard, he was having a hard time finding a lawyer willing to take the case.

Nobody wants a loser."

We talked for a while longer, then walked to our cars together. I felt a lot better now, and on the way home, I thought about Alicia. Maybe I could go on to Plan B now—a date with her without Bowie as a chaperone. I decided I'd call her tomorrow and see if she'd go for it.

When I got home, the phone was ringing. I went through the list of people who could possibly be calling me at this time of night, and almost decided not to answer it. On the off chance that it might be Alicia, I picked up the receiver and heard a wheezy voice on the other end of the line. It was no doubt Hernandez' revenge.

"My mom says I can drive now," the fat kid said. He sounded excited. "Will you teach me?"

(continued from page 4)

High Noon at Midnight by Michael Avallone

Murder Unrenovated by P. M. Carlson

The Man Who Died Laughing by David Handler

A Radical Departure by Lia Matera

Paying the Piper by Sharyn McCrumb

Murder by Impulse by D. R. Meredith

Primary Target by Marilyn Wallace

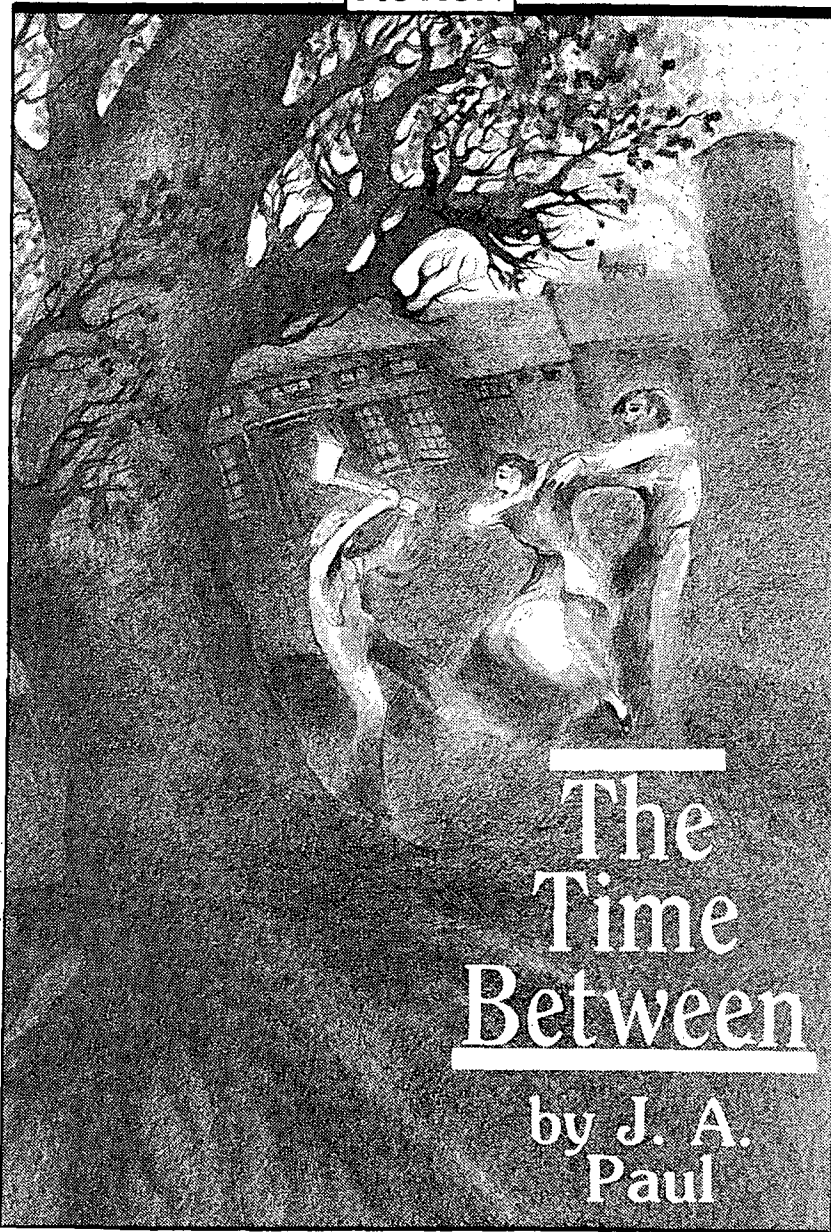
The Shamus Awards are given by the Private Eye Writers of America, for novels and stories about private investigators. This year's nominees and winners:

BEST P.I. NOVEL OF 1988:

Kiss by John Lutz

(continued on page 52)

FICTION



The Time Between

by J. A.
Paul

Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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There's that time between day and night when it's neither. In some parts of the world the time between is so short you can't see it. Still, it must be there. It can't be day and night at the same time, any more than there can be life and death at the same time. In between the two is a flutter of both or neither. I'm not sure which.

Lord, I miss Eleanor. I didn't know a man could love a woman he'd been married to for twenty years as if it was their honeymoon. Even now, three years gone, it hurts just to think about her.

I tapped out my pipe. The entry was dated August, 1952, three years after my grandmother had been murdered by a drunken derelict. The old diary had been a surprise. It was hard to imagine grizzled old Grandpa writing down such thoughts. He wasn't a man to say much.

I was tired. I had been up since four A.M., when the hospital had called to tell me Grandpa had collapsed at the local tavern. It had taken them hours to find my number. I had driven most of the morning, hoping to see Grandpa before he died, and although I made it, it hadn't mattered much. He was no longer fully conscious. He didn't know me. I stayed at the hospital till mid-afternoon when exhaustion sent me to rest at his old farmhouse.

It was a small town and word traveled fast. I was Grandpa's only relative, a fact most of the townspeople knew, yet the kitchen table was laden with food. I got up to sample some of the baked beans, took a saucerful, and went back to the diary. It was by no means kept daily. Some entries were six months apart. It was an old fashioned blue cardboard covered looseleaf, quite full, to which pages could be added. There were fresh blank sheets at the back. I leafed through it, having nothing better to do with the remainder of the day. I hoped he would recognize me in the morning, that the phone would remain silent through the night.

Walter tried to fix me up on a date today. As if Eleanor could be replaced! He knows better. He loved her, too. I keep thinking I'll see her again, I mean besides that God-awful last time out in the front yard that comes every night at dusk. I hear you can sell your soul to the devil and get anything you want in return. I want Eleanor walking beside me again, but old Lucifer ain't made an offer.

A chill went up my spine. The entry was dated 1969. Grandma Eleanor had been murdered in the front yard in 1949. According to the entry, Grandpa had "seen" her moment of death every night for twenty years. Forty, if his hallucination continued. It was night-

marish. "Poor Grandpa," I told the empty room.

"You talk to yourself, too? Must run in the family."

I elevated three inches from the chair, heart pounding and hair on end.

"Didn't mean to spook you," said an old man from the other side of the screen door. "My name's Walter Bethroe. You must be the grandson."

Besides his appearance in the diary, my grandfather had mentioned Walter over the years. They had known each other forever. Although embarrassed at being caught redhanded talking to myself, I remembered my manners and let him in.

"I'm Howard Stintson," I said.

He nodded and held out yet another foil-covered pot. "This here is pork and sauerkraut," he said.

A man after my own palate.

"Join me?" I asked.

He did so, and except for my polite compliments on his meal, we ate pretty much in silence. From the looks of him, he and Grandpa were very much two of a kind. Walter was sturdy and weather-beaten and, like Grandpa, alert for a man closing in on eighty. Over coffee he came out of his reverie.

"I'm gonna miss Thomas. I surely am."

I nodded but remained silent. What could I say? Grandpa's heart had been weak for years. He was dying and we both knew it. Walter had reached an age where few friends, if any, remained. His loss would run deep.

"It'll be dusk soon, almost time," Walter said.

"For what?" I asked. There were no animals to feed, I had checked.

"We ought to clear the table before all this food goes bad," was all he said.

We put pots and bowls in the refrigerator, dirty dishes in the sink. Walter neatly ran soapy water and left them to soak.

"You best sit down, boy," he said.

Did he want a card game? It was okay with me. He pulled up the window shade and looked outside.

"What do you know about your grandmother's death?" he asked.

The question surprised me. I would have thought he would tell anecdotes about Grandpa, if he wanted to talk at all. I thought back to what my father had told me. Familiarity with the story somewhat lessened its gruesome quality. "In 1949, Grandma was

axed to death by an Indian. No one knew who he was. He was assumed to be a drifter who had too much to drink, saw a pretty woman, and for some reason went berserk. Grandpa had come in from the fields just after the killing and at the sight of Grandma went wild. He beat the Indian to death."

Walter nodded. "That's the way I told it," he said.

I didn't recall his presence being mentioned.

"You were there?" I asked.

"Only at the end," he answered. He folded his arms on the table and cleared his throat. "I don't know how to tell all this, boy. You'll likely think Thomas is crazy. He isn't, no matter how it sounds. I saw him at the hospital early this morning and I promised him I'd tell you the truth. There's something he's going to do tonight. If he does it, you might think you'd lost your mind. It would only last a few minutes, but he wants to spare you that. If he can't manage it, he still wants you to know the whole story."

"Manage, what?" Frankly I was a bit jealous that he had been there while Grandpa was still lucid.

"You'll see for yourself," said Walter pointing to the front yard. "It's Eleanor's death. It happens all over again. I saw it myself, years ago. Afterwards, I never came visiting at twilight again. Mornings or after dark, yes. Never again at dusk."

This was too much. Though it matched with what was in the diary, I was more inclined to understand Grandpa's mental aberrations than Walter's. It was Grandpa's wife who had died a horrible death. The trick his mind played for years afterward was strange, but probably an understandable result of psychological trauma. I didn't feel the same about Walter's claiming to have seen the crime again. I re-evaluated my former assessment of his mental capacities. There seemed to be only one remark in all he had said to which I might logically respond.

"I don't think Grandpa will be able to accomplish anything, Walter. He was in pretty bad shape when I left."

He said nothing.

I looked outside. Whatever they hoped I might see wasn't readily apparent. My car was parked under the thick old oak. There was a fence needing paint and a few cracks in the asphalt. There was nothing peculiar about any of it.

Walter rubbed his hands across the worn checkered oilcloth.

"I'll tell you how it was in the beginning," he said finally. "Tom, Eleanor, and me, we all grew up together. Eleanor was beautiful

and sweet, and Thomas and I both loved her. We had a fight over her nearly every week from the time we were fourteen. People used to bet on which of us she'd marry. For sure it would be one of us. We were both from landed people, had ambitions to enlarge our property and better ourselves. We were churchgoers and decently educated. We were handsome, too, if I do say so. It was odd, what with the competition for Eleanor, but we were also the best of friends. If the truth be told, I thought Eleanor was favoring me. And then he came."

For a moment the old man was silent. I suppose he was lost in his memories. I was grateful the conversation had taken a normal turn.

"Who came?" I prompted.

"The Indian. Fleet. Half Indian, anyway. His ma had named him Fleet-footed something or other, but when they came here everybody shortened it to Fleet. They were from somewhere up by Lubec. We understood that his father was a Norwegian sailing man. He had his ma's coloring, though. His skin was dark, and his eyes and hair were black. He was full of fire and the girls in town near fainted when he was around. At the annual fair he knocked the rest of us boys off our pins in everything from horse racing to pistol matches. Eleanor wouldn't run after him like the other girls. She was too proud for shenanigans like that, and as it turned out, she didn't have to. Soon as Fleet saw Eleanor, it was like all the rest became invisible. Crazy about her, he was. Worse even than Thomas or me. What came as the surprise, though, was that she returned his feelings. You'd think it would've ended happy for them, but you got to remember it was still the twenties. No self-respecting family would allow their daughter out the door with a poor, half-breed Indian. Suddenly Eleanor didn't go anywhere without her ma. I guess they figured she'd get over him. Thomas and I sure figured it that way. Well, to make it short, Thomas and Eleanor's family both belonged to the same church, which gave Thomas the inside track over me. Eleanor was a good girl, the kind who listened to her family. The marriage was arranged and Thomas was in heaven. Can't say I blame him. I would have been, too." The old man stopped for a few moments to shake his head sadly.

"Trouble was," he continued. "Eleanor never was the same after that. She hardly ever smiled. The marriage took place and Fleet went back north somewhere. A year or two later your pa was born and she got a bit better, but still not the same." He stopped again

and looked at me guiltily. "Son, I never thought to say it, and I hope you forgive me. About your pa, and your ma, too, though I never met her. I sure am sorry."

Both my parents had been killed in an auto crash about three years before. It was kind of him to mention it. "Thank you," I said.

The sun outside was definitely fading.

"I'd best hurry," said Walter. "Fleet started to come back. It wasn't often. He just turned up every couple of years or so, stayed out in the woods somewhere for a few days, then disappeared again. I guess it was to see how Eleanor was doing. Lord knows, no one but us three ever saw him. He didn't socialize none. As it turned out, he must've been waiting till Eleanor was ready. I guess Eleanor was waiting till your pa went off to college. Don't fault her, though. She was only seventeen when she was forced to marry a man she didn't love. Thomas knew it was just a matter of time till she went off with Fleet. Years, maybe. But coming just as sure as old age. It was bad for Thomas, but son, I think we all knew it was worse for Fleet. He just kept coming back and going away, like the tide. It didn't look like he ever took a wife of his own. The woman he wanted belonged to another man. He was a sorry sight to see in them years. Pitiful."

I was shocked. It was pitiful, all right. However, my pity was reserved for the man who had spent twenty years married to a woman who didn't love him, my grandfather.

"It was late spring of 1949," Walter went on. "Thomas had a mare in foal. Like most farmers, he had a sixth sense about when the foal was coming. In those days, we used to have continuous barns, which means that out from the house was a lot of connected outbuildings. Nearest the house was the woodshed. In Thomas's yard that connected to an old carriage house, which went on to connect to the corn shed, cow shed, dairy, and barn. In other words, you could be out in the barn and pretty far away, and enclosed, too. Eleanor didn't know that Thomas had come in early that day to see to his mare. He'd have no reason to make any noise, and every reason to be quiet and soothing. He told me later that he heard a couple of cars, but hadn't thought anything of it. It was dusk when he got finished. He walked back through the buildings and came out the side of the woodshed which opened to the yard. The first thing he saw was Eleanor's things in the back of an old black Ford. I've often wondered why she waited till that hour before leaving. Thomas always came in from the fields about that same

time. The only thing I can figure is that it took them longer to get her belongings than they thought it would. Anyway, Thomas saw the car first, then Eleanor and Fleet, and all three kind of froze. Now if he had come upon them someplace else, the story might have ended different. Thomas wasn't naturally a violent man. But he was in the woodshed, and the axe was right to hand. Sure, he says he knew for years that Eleanor was going, but it wasn't right that he had to see it happening right in front of him like that. It was too much for any man to bear. He picked up the axe and charged out at Fleet like a bull gone mad."

I sat like stone, certain of the outcome of the story. Walter passed a hand through his sparse hair.

"My house," he continued, "is but a quarter mile down, the other side of the road. In those days we didn't turn on the TV the minute we walked in the door. It was quieter then. I heard a roar. It made my blood run cold. I'd never heard the like of it before. I rushed outside. It seemed to have come from Thomas's direction. I didn't even think to use my car. I just ran.

"Back here, Thomas was running at Fleet and Eleanor was trying to get in front of him to protect him. When Thomas saw Eleanor in the way, he tried to change the direction the axe was heading, but in that same fraction of a second, Fleet tried to protect her, too. He shoved her aside, right into the downswing. I won't describe that further. I was running down the road when I heard the next scream. I think that was Fleet. Thomas was bent over Eleanor trying to pull out the . . ." The old man gulped and took a breath. "Anyway, Fleet went mad. He pulled Thomas off with a rage that would scare the devil himself. Trouble was, for all his strength he swung wild, like he didn't know what direction to hit. I guess the thing that counted most was that Thomas was beyond feeling physical pain. Nothing short of a bullet would have stopped Thomas that night. I know. I tried. By the time I came running down that there driveway, Thomas was banging Fleet's head against the oak. It took me forever to pull him off. It took me even longer to convince him Eleanor was dead. He kept trying to get to her. Landed a few good ones on me before I got through to him. I got him into the house. At the time I naturally wasn't sure just which one had killed Eleanor, but I had no problem about which one I wanted to blame. I grabbed a bottle of whisky and went back out and poured it on Fleet. I brought Eleanor's clothes inside and threw them in the bedroom closet. Thomas was numb, sitting like one of them statues,

except his face was bloody and swollen. I left it alone for the sheriff to see. Then I called him and told everybody the story you know. Nobody but the four of us knew how those two had waited twenty years. Nobody remembered Fleet. Nobody questioned my version. Thomas might have said something at the beginning, but it was weeks before he could say anything at all. Nor did he ever say anything about what I did. About six months later, though, he asked me to come here at dusk. I guess he wanted me to know that he never meant to hurt Eleanor. I thought he'd gone crazy when he told me what I'd see. Afterwards, I thought I had."

Well, I hadn't. I looked out again at the benign front yard. The two men had fed each other's imagination for forty years. Especially if Walter's current version was true, which I believed. Only a shared sense of guilt could prompt identical hallucinations. It was too late to help Grandpa. Maybe I could still help Walter.

"My grandmother's death was an accident," I said. "The Indian's probably qualified as self defense. Grandpa's lifting the axe, in all probability, would have been attributed to temporary insanity. You should put your mind at rest, Walter."

"It is, son. I have no regrets about what I did."

"Then what is this all about? Even if I did see the whole thing, what difference would it make?"

"None," he replied. "But Thomas says we won't see it the way it was the first time. It's going to come out different."

"How?"

"He's going to change it. Anyway, that's what he thinks. He tried before, but he said he couldn't get through from the living side. Then he figured it out, he said. But first, you got to understand Thomas. He was guilty about robbing them of the life they were supposed to have together. He said he had Eleanor for twenty years when he shouldn't have had her at all, and he was given a fine son in the bargain. He thought it only right for her and Fleet to have their time together like they always wanted."

"They have eternity together," I said coldly.

Walter smiled and shook his head. "Thomas didn't see it that way."

"Listen," I said using my most reasonable tone of voice. "No matter what my grandfather wanted to do, you mustn't expect miracles. History is unchangeable."

"Thomas said that between life and death is a time we don't understand, when each side could get through to the other. If they

met at the right time and place, they could change what happened the first time. He used to want to kill himself just to get it done and over with, but he couldn't figure a way that wasn't too fast. It had to come natural; then he had to hang on till dusk so he could meet them when they came again. Tonight's probably the night. We'll see."

What could I say to this old man? Even if he relived the killings, I certainly wouldn't. Changing history was even more preposterous. When the time came, should I humor him? Lie? I followed his gaze to the diminishing light of the front yard. Suddenly I hoped his imagination would allow him to see whatever he wished.

My first impression was puzzlement, my second disbelief. My Chrysler was gone. I experienced that disoriented feeling which comes from witnessing something either tragic or impossible. My car was there a minute ago. Now it wasn't. The paved driveway was gone. Now a dirt drive led out to a gravelly road. The oak stood slimmer. Under it was parked an ancient dusty black Ford. The car doors were open. Boxes and articles of women's clothing were visible. Near the car, two people materialized. One was a tall man whose face was more bone than flesh. The hollows of that face caught and held the shadows that fell around him. His eyes, dark as a moonless midnight, were captured by the woman facing him. He was about to help her into the car. I tried to look at Walter, I suppose to assure myself that I wasn't dreaming, or maybe to prove that I was, but found I was unable to do anything but stare at the unfolding scene. Outside, the two people hesitated, then turned together toward something beyond my vision. Only when the woman turned would I admit who she really was. It was my grandmother, Eleanor. I was amazed by her youth. She had seemed so much older in the family album. Here, she was no more than four or five years older than I. Her golden brown hair was in a loose bun at the nape of her neck. She wore an ankle-length dark brown skirt, and though she stood very erect, she barely reached the shoulder of her companion. Her eyes, when I finally saw them, were haunted and sad.

I didn't hear the roar Walter had heard, but I felt it. It isn't possible to describe this, but I "heard" it with a different, foreign, sense. I couldn't bear to watch the scene he had drawn so painfully clearly, and again I tried to look away. I couldn't. I was transfixed.

Another man appeared. He was not as tall as the first, but he was broader. His eyes were shocking in their intensity, his mouth

a grim, bloodless line. He held an axe. Eleanor's face now streamed with tears. She stepped in front of the gaunt man, and I saw her mouth forming pleas. From behind, the Indian grasped her shoulders and moved her out of harm's way. My grandfather, for of course it was he, flew at his enemy like a majestic, crazed eagle. Massive and enraged, he raised the axe. Again Eleanor threw herself in front of the man she so obviously loved. Grandpa, eyes on fire, was now but a few feet away from the man who was thief of all he held dear. The axe stopped in mid-air. The scene froze.

If I should live a century beyond a normal life span, it won't feel as long as the moments that followed. My chest was constricted. I was sure my heart had stopped. My fingers gripped the table edge. I watched Grandpa's face soften, and his shoulders sag. I saw the axe fall harmlessly to the ground, and watched as he used the handle to lean upon. I never knew such pity existed as I felt when I witnessed resignation consume him. The Indian didn't hesitate. He swung Eleanor into the car as another man appeared, racing down the road. The third man stopped at the foot of the drive as the car turned right and drove out of sight. Of course it was a younger version of Walter, the man sitting next to me. He went to my grandfather, who was still standing in the yard, and they stood quietly together as night fell around them.

A highway light appeared and, with it, the outline of my car. I was grateful that a small part of reality had made an appearance. "He did it," Walter whispered.

The phone rang. My world was back. I practically knocked it off the hook. "Stintson residence," I answered in a foreign voice. It was the hospital, of course. Grandpa was dead. I stumbled to his desk and my hands shook as I turned the pages of his diary. It looked the same. Why shouldn't it? Not once had he said that Eleanor was dead. I turned to the blank pages at the back and grabbed a pen.

"That's right, boy," said Walter. "Write it down quick before we forget."

Forget? Not likely. My problem is the memories crowding out all else. I remember Fleet who taught me to cast and fish in the turbulent Atlantic waters from a small island off the coast of Maine. I remember the small, happy bungalow on that island where I spent many youthful summers in the company of Grandma Eleanor and the rugged, rangy man who adored her. I remember attending his funeral, following so shortly the death of my parents. I had

loved him more than the quiet, isolated man I had called Grandpa Tom, whom I now loved and understood more than I ever thought I might. Most of all, I remember, and must continue to remember, that these memories had not existed one half hour before. Two lifetimes had not existed.

I wonder about the impact of these events, and decide that except for the disappearance of some dusty old newspaper copy, there will probably be none.

Walter has memories of his own to contend with. He's at the sink methodically washing and rinsing the dishes. "Don't want Eleanor coming back to a mess," he says.

I remember that Grandpa sent Eleanor a letter, telling her the house is hers, that she must come home as soon as he's gone. I know now the reason for this. He wants Walter to look after her.

"Write it down, boy," Walter keeps repeating as my fingers try to fly over the pages. "You and me are the only ones who'll know what Thomas did. We mustn't forget." He's now washing cabinet doors and counter tops. A thought occurs to me as I look up at him.

"Walter, did you ever marry?"

"Me? No. Keep writing, boy."

"Don't worry," I say. "I'll write till it's finished."

(continued from page 41)

Neon Mirage by Max Allan Collins

Deviant Behavior by Earl Emerson

Swan Dive by Jeremiah Healy

Blood Shot by Sara Paretsky

BEST P.I. FIRST NOVEL OF 1988:

***Fear of the Dark* by Gar Anthony Haywood**

Lost Daughter by Michael Cormany

Burning Season by Wayne D. Dundee

Wall of Glass by Walter Satterthwait

Slow Dance in Autumn by Philip Lee Williams

BEST P.I. SHORT STORY OF 1988:

"The Crooked Way" by Loren D. Estleman

"The Man Who Knew Dick Bony" by Robert Crais

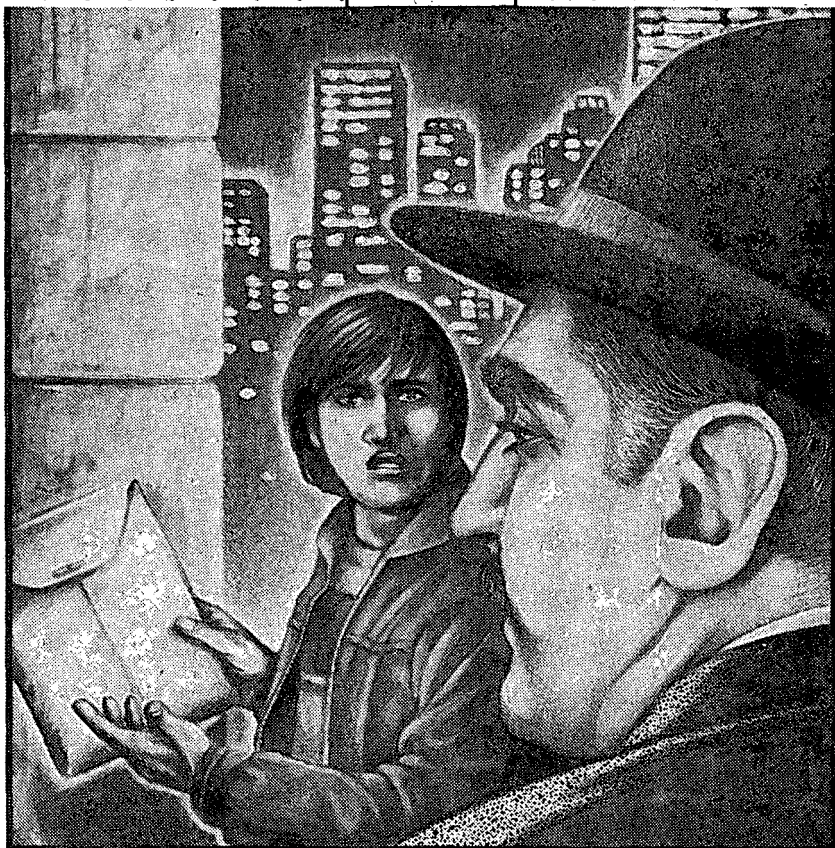
"The Reason Why" by Ed Gorman

"In the Line of Duty" by Jeremiah Healy

"Incident in a Neighborhood Tavern" by Bill Pronzini

Congratulations to all!

FICTION



Night Deposit

by Ed Dumonte

Standish 89©

Illustration by Timothy Standish

LICENSED T53 UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If the United States were a society of classes, Mr. Trumble might well be considered a part of the Aristocratic Class. As it is, Mr. Trumble was a common, ordinary citizen who, properly skinned and dressed from homburg to Guccis, might yield a pelt worth something in excess of three thousand dollars.

If the United States were a society of classes, young Tommy Benson might be considered a part of the Criminal Class. As it is, Tommy was a common, ordinary citizen dressed in chinòs, denim, and tennis shoes who happened to be holding an automatic pistol pointed right at the middle of Mr. Trumble's Savile Row suit.

"I'll take that nice fat envelope you're holding, Mr. Trumble," Tommy said.

This tableau was being performed in front of the night deposit box of the First State Bank at one o'clock in the morning. The night deposit box was a stone pillar with a stainless steel door which Mr. Trumble was holding open, preparing to drop in what was indeed a nice fat envelope.

"Young man, I assure you there is nothing of any interest to you in this envelope," said he.

"I certainly wouldn't call you a liar, Mr. Trumble, but I happen to know that today is the day that you make your weekly deposit of the funds taken in by the fancy restaurant you own. I worked there one week as a dishwasher while your regular man was down with the flu. I started watching you then.

"I noticed that at the end of the day you would collect all the receipts and take them back to your office. But you didn't leave the restaurant. Even after the kitchen help and cleaning people had finished and were going home, you were still in your office. It wasn't until Sunday that you collected the receipts, went back to your office for a short while, and left the restaurant holding a nice fat envelope very like the one now in your hand."

"You seem to be a very astute and discerning young man," Mr. Trumble said. "I'm surprised I didn't notice it at the time. In my line of work I'm always on the lookout for clever young men."

"Oh? Do you really need clever dishwashers, smart swampers to mop the floors and vacuum the rugs, educated busboys to clear the tables and carry dirty dishes back to the sink in the kitchen?"

"You misunderstand, young man," Trumble said. "What you have seen at the restaurant is merely the tip of the iceberg. A very lucrative tip, I grant you, but still just a tip. Enough to satisfy the tax people.

"The real work goes on in the other nine-tenths, the part that is under water. Or, more accurately in this case, underworld.

"You see, young man, the restaurant business pretty well takes care of itself. The cash registers are all automated and keep a running printout of food, liquor, and taxes. All I have to do is subtract a fixed amount for overhead and wages and I have a pretty fair estimate of what the day's profits were.

"The hard part, the part that keeps me in the office late at night, is trying to figure the income from some of my other enterprises. The bookmaking, the numbers, the robberies, the auto thefts. The people who specialize in these fields are all my employees. Unfortunately, they're not always honest and I have to keep a close check on them."

As Mr. Trumble talked, Tommy's gun had gradually lost its resolve and was now pointing straight down.

"Do you mean to say that you're part of the," he hesitated over the word and spoke it softly, "*Mafia*?"

"Oh, no," Mr. Trumble said. "I've looked into it, of course, as any businessman would. But I found it was pretty much a godfather-son sort of thing. A closed corporation, so to speak. These other little things are all of my own doing and all completely under my control. I allow no outside interference. Sometimes quite forcefully."

Tommy, now completely enthralled, gun quite forgotten, took a step closer to the larger man.

"This is where you come in, young man." Mr. Trumble put his hand on Tommy's shoulder. "I told you earlier that this package held nothing of interest to you. Now it may be of very much interest to you indeed. You see, this package contains a powerful bomb. It's a *plastique* that is shaped to blow a hole through armored steel such as the inside of this deposit box is lined with.

"This is just an experiment, but if it works I have greater things in mind and I want you to take charge of them.

"Now here's my plan: there are thousands of night deposit boxes all across the country. I'm going to need a good man, bright and ambitious, such as you are, to travel across the country as an executive of my restaurant corporation to find new sites for us to locate in. As an executive, of course, you will have to dress the part, live in the most posh hotels, dine at the finest restaurants, escort the most beautiful ladies.

"Do you think you could handle that?"

Tommy, whose eyes had become glazed at the sight of the far side of the mountain, was unable to speak.

"Well, then. What I'm going to want you to do is take the design of this bomb to all the cities you go to and make duplicates of it. You will hire people to take them to deposit boxes like this one, perhaps half a dozen or more of them in a single night, blow a hole in them, remove the money, and bring it back to you.

"You pay your expenses from the top of the take, and we split the remainder, two-thirds for me, one-third for you. You pay the men you hire out of your cut, I advance the money you'll need to get started."

Tommy's eyes suddenly became unglazed, and he took a step back and his pistol came to attention again, pointing at Mr. Trumble's midriff.

"That was quite a con job, man," he said. "You almost had me fooled there for a minute. But I'm on to you now. You're trying to talk me out of the envelope that started this discussion. Now, let's get back to business. As I said to begin with, give me that envelope."

"Please, young man, believe me. There is a timing device on this bomb, and it is set to go off in just a few moments. If we don't get rid of this thing and get out of here pretty quickly, we'll be spots of bloody goo all over the street."

"No, more, Mr. Trumble," Tommy said. "Give me the envelope and we'll go our separate ways."

"Please, young man . . ." But the gun was the convincing factor and the transaction took place.

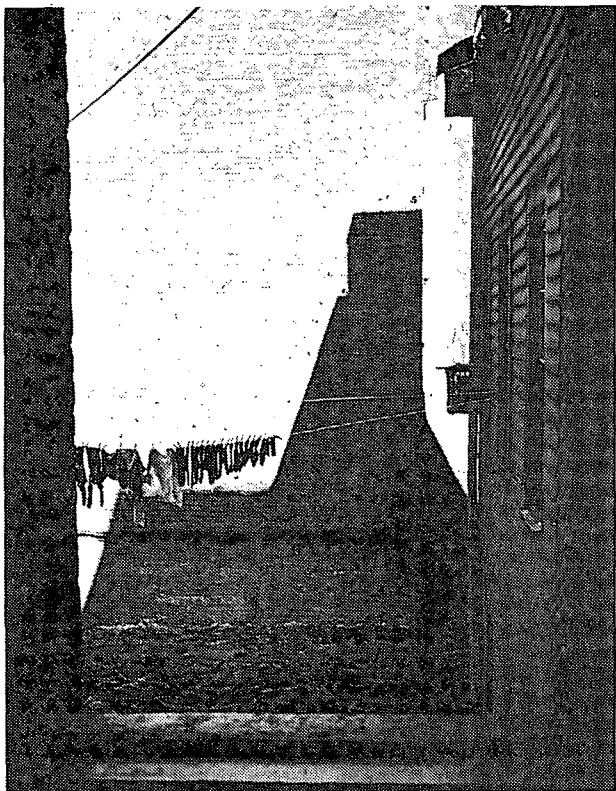
Tommy put the envelope beneath his denim jacket and disappeared into the shadows. Mr. Trumble turned the other way and walked slowly to his car. As he reached the car he heard a dull thump from somewhere behind him.

With a heavy sigh he got into the car and started the engine. As he was about to pull away from the curb a police car pulled up beside him.

"Excuse me, sir," the cop in the passenger seat rolled down his window and said, "we've had a radio report of some sort of disturbance in the neighborhood. Have you seen or heard anything unusual?"

"No, officer," Mr. Trumble said. "Nothing I didn't expect."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



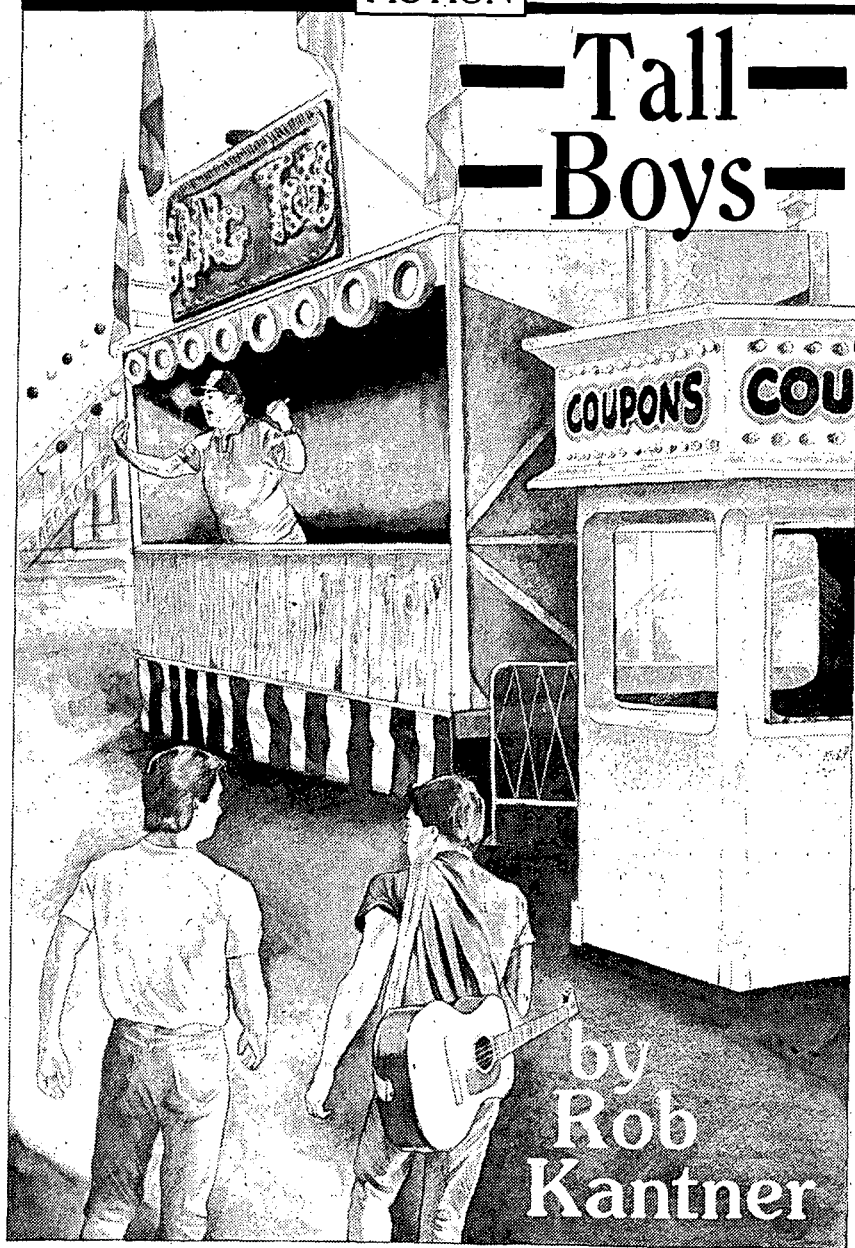
© N. Jay Jaffe

A clean getaway in the making? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

—Tall— —Boys—



by
Rob
Kantner

Illustration by Thomas Fleming

58

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Daddy was dying. Not from the emphysema; that was three years from grabbing him. No: Daddy was dying because it looked like come November he'd have to vote for a Republican—or a Catholic.

"Even Truman don't want him in there!" Daddy ranted, waving his forkful of smother-broil chicken in the air. "He said Kinnedy ain't ready to be president yet, and I agree with him."

"Now there's a surprise," Ma said as she spooned a double helping of mashed potatoes onto my plate.

Daddy's lips whitened as he glared at her. "I always took a shine to President Truman," he said dangerously.

Ma stopped serving my brother Bill, straightened and stared at Daddy. "For heaven's sake, Lewis! Back when he was in, you said men under five eight shouldn't be dog catcher, let alone president!"

Daddy looked angrily perplexed. Across from me, Uncle Dan cleared his throat. I was hoping he'd point out that Daddy himself was only five seven. But Uncle Dan was just as gunshy of Daddy as the rest of us. Ironic, since he was the only person I ever knew for whom Daddy had grudging respect, bordering on awe. He observed dryly, "Well, Truman should

know 'not ready to be president' when he sees it."

I snickered. "Let's eat!" Ma said, pointedly ending the political discourse as she sat down at the end of the table to my left. "Libby will just have to take supper cold. Say the blessing, please, Benjy?"

We linked hands around the table and I closed my eyes, trying to think of the words. Fortunately, I was saved by the scuffing of footsteps on our porch outside and the squeal of the screen door hinges. "Hi, everybody!" my sister Libby called from the door. "I want you to meet somebody."

She walked at a bounce toward the dining area, accompanied by a boy/man wearing a small respectful smile. Even to my unschooled eyes, he looked older than Libby. Than me, even.

Libby's black hair was parted in the middle and combed down smooth, cut at ear lobe level all the way around. Bangs curved down her forehead, arching over her dark eyes. She more than adequately filled her black sleeveless blouse and white striped shorts. A perky girl with a secret smile; my baby sister but suddenly no little girl any more.

Ma was looking at Libby. Uncle Dan, having sized things up, was examining his clasped hands. Daddy, leaning back in

his chair with feigned casualness, studied Libby's friend with his smoky blue eyes, the kind of eyes that terrorized Union troops a hundred years before. "Where you been, Elizabeth?" he asked softly.

"A carnival out in Nankin Mills. Jill's brother took us. That's where I met Jimmy. He works in the carnival." She beamed at her friend. "Jimmy Herndon, meet my family. That's Daddy and Mama. This is my brother Bill, that's my brother Benjy, and over there's my uncle Dan Perkins."

Herndon was a big beefy razor-cut blond wearing a yellow sport shirt, dark slacks, and pointy-toed shoes. He stepped toward Daddy, big paw outstretched. "So nice to meet you, Mr. Perkins. Say, what a great house you have here! You know, I've seen a lot of the Midwest, but Detroit is—"

"How old are you, son?" Daddy asked. There was nothing but interest in his voice. He was relaxed there in his chair, head tipped back, the hard planes of his face benign. The hairs rose on the back of my neck.

"Twenty-four," Herndon said, dropping his untouched hand.

"Daddy—" Libby began.

"Did you know," Daddy said, "that Elizabeth just turned fifteen?"

Herndon grinned crookedly. "Well, we hadn't really—"

Libby threw an imploring look at Ma as Daddy said in a whiplike voice, "Fifteen years old! What kind of skunk did your folks raise you to be, courtin' a fifteen-year-old little girl?"

Herndon held up both hands. "Courting? I'm not—"

Daddy leaped to his feet, his chair crashing to the floor behind him. "Get out!" he shrieked, face purpling. His fury demanded more oxygen than his ruined lungs could possibly provide; he exhaled in hard puffs between phrases. "Get out! Get out of my house! You son of a bitch! Get out!"

Libby began to cry. Herndon, twice Daddy's size and well under half his age, took one step back, gave Libby an unreadable glance, then turned and strode out of the house.

My sister's round face was wet and white. "Thanks an awful lot!" she shouted to the room at large, then ran away into the living room.

My big brother Bill stared grimly into his lap. Uncle Dan looked levelly at me. My heart pounded as if I was the object of my daddy's wrath instead of a bystander. Ma had risen and now, as Libby's footsteps echoed up the stairs, she went to Daddy and put her strong arms around his thin shoulders. "Now sit down, Lewis," she said brusquely. "Sit down and rest and take some supper."

"Son of a bitch," Daddy muttered, the words punctuated by puffs. But he sat.

Ma looked all right, but in her own way she was as upset as Daddy, as indicated by the fact that she clean forgot about grace. "Come on, let's eat," she said, spearing her chicken. "Libby will just have to take hers cold."

"I surely do look forward to these Wednesday night suppers with your family, Ben," Uncle Dan said dryly.

"Daddy's been real poorly lately," I said. "And that dopey sister of mine must have a death wish or something, dropping that guy on Daddy like that. I mean, she ain't even officially allowed to single-date yet. You really think he's twenty-four, Uncle?"

"Was once, anyway. I have a feeling he's been a lot of things. In a lot of places."

The humid July evening was darkening the porch, which opened on three sides to our heavily treed front yard. I sat on the stone railing, facing Uncle Dan, who was half visible on the big oak glider. He was a thin, wiry man who looked younger than his sixty-two years, with a full head of neatly trimmed, graying auburn hair and a narrow unlined face highlighted by remote gray eyes. As usual he wore a light, neatly

tailored suit with shiny black wing tips and a narrow black tie. His Panama hat sat on the glider next to him and a Camel cigarette smoldered between his fingers.

I was jumpy as hell, the Big Question sitting fat in my mouth. Uncle Dan knew that, and was enjoying the suspense. We both looked toward the driveway as Bill's '58 Fairlane Town Sedan backed along the side of the house and then took off up the street. "Where's he off to?" Uncle Dan asked idly. "His shift doesn't start till midnight."

"Probably gone to see Marybeth first," I mumbled.

"He's been at Ford's what, eight years now," Uncle Dan observed. "Think you'll be able to hang on that long, Ben?"

It took a moment for what he said to register. I stood, fists clenched, heart pounding. "Really, Uncle? When?"

"Monday week, afternoons, at the Rouge."

"Doing what?" Please, no sweeping floors.

"Hanging doors on Fairlanes and Galaxies."

I whooped. "Great! Beats sweeping floors."

My uncle inhaled on his cigarette. "Lot of good men sweep floors at the Rouge. I did it myself, for awhile."

"Hey, it don't matter! This is great! Now I can quit the

freakin' grocery store and make some serious dough!"

"Sit down," he said softly. I complied. My uncle leaned forward. "You remember our deal. You're going to pass your courses next year and you're going to graduate high school. You're not a punk kid any more, you're a grown man, and you've got obligations."

"Yes sir, Uncle Dan," I said, toning down the excitement.

"I hear you're flunking anything, I'll get you fired out of Ford's. Hear?"

I wondered if he could really do that. Uncle Dan had seniority to burn, but was only a foreman. There was, on the other hand, a lot about him I did not know. That none of us, Daddy included, ever knew. "Yes, sir. And I'll pay you back for the car loan, right off the top."

"No hurry," he said, leaning back on the glider.

"Evening, Ben!" called a female voice from behind me.

I turned. "Oh, hi, Miz Wilder," I called back.

"Lovely evening," she said, smiling at us, strolling by alone in the gloom of the big trees.

"Sure is."

Uncle Dan was sitting up straight, peering past me. "Neighbor lady?" he asked softly.

"Lives up at the corner of Bentler."

"Mm. Nice. Miss or Missus?" "Missus."

I caught him looking at me closely. After a moment he said, "Your mother was telling me about your new girlfriend. Debbie?"

I scowled. "Debbie Miller. She's not my girlfriend, just a sophomore chick who lives in the house back of us. Been hanging around here, and Mama's been egging her on, but there's nothing there. I'm playing the field," I ended bravely.

Uncle Dan's distant eyes were on me again, making me feel distinctly uncomfortable. I wished that I could smoke; it would have helped at moments like that. "Think I'll mosey along home," he said, as he stood and put on his Panama, "before Act Two starts."

That was fine with me. It was pushing eight o'clock; *Silent Service* was coming on. I walked with Uncle Dan down the brick steps and across the narrow lawn to the curb, where his brand-new Thunderbird convertible, the most expensive car Ford built, was parked behind my brand-new second-hand '51 Deluxe Tudor sedan. "What do you mean, Act Two?" I asked as we walked.

"Libby and her new, uh, beau," he said. He crushed out his cigarette, opened the door and got inside.

"Oh, I think Daddy done killed

that thing dead," I grinned.

"I don't," my uncle answered, face bleak in the fading light. "I saw them together in there."

I had no idea what he meant. "Whatever happens, it won't affect me none," I said with bravado that was entirely felt.

"May you be so lucky, Ben."

He started the T-Bird, waved, and pulled away up Bennett Street, motor purring, tires humming, taillights glowing red in the gathering darkness.

Three mornings later, I hoofed barefoot into the kitchen, tugging my blue National Foods uniform shirt down over my head. "Mama, I threw my newer work pants down the chute the other day. You washed 'em yet?"

She glanced at me over her shoulder as she rinsed off a breakfast bowl in the sink. "I finished the wash yesterday, Benjy. Those pants weren't in there."

"I *know* I put 'em down the chute."

"They'll turn up. Wear your old ones for today." She shut off the water. "Miz Wilder called a minute ago. Her husband's gone away on business, and she wanted to know if you could stop by there this morning and move some boxes for her. I said you could."

Move some boxes, I repeated silently. "Sure," I said, "I'll stop

by there before I go to work."

"Bring me a pig's head from the grocery." She took down a dish towel and started drying her hands. "We're having Brunswick stew tomorrow."

"I'll bring you the dead pig," I grinned, "but I'll need some dough."

"Take a five out of Daddy's cash kitty."

"Daddy won't like that."

"You do like I tell you," she advised, "and let me worry about your daddy."

"Yes, ma'am." Easy for you to say, I thought. He doesn't ever hit *you*.

She finished drying and hung the towel back up. The house around us was Saturday silent. Bill was working overtime at Ford's; Daddy's schedule at Kerns Casket was four on and two off, causing his weekends to rotate around; Libby was out somewhere. My mother looked me over, and she seemed to decide. "Set down, Benjy. I got something important to talk to you about."

Nervous and uncomfortable, I sat. My mother took the chair across from me. Her squarish face was tired and her eyes lacked their usual fervor. Her blue housedress was already limp from early heat and humidity and work. She folded her hands, looked at them, then at me. "You probably ain't aware of it," she began quietly. "You

got your own life these days. But there's trouble in this house."

I was afraid even to breathe. "What kind of trouble?"

"Your sister," Ma said, "is still seeing that boy. That Jimmy Herndon."

Inside I sighed, and thanked my lucky stars that it was Libby's ass in a sling this time, and not mine. "How do you know, Ma?"

"Just a feelin'," she said. "Your mamma ain't a total dern fool, you know. I know a lot about what goes on in this house." I wasn't about to touch that one. After a pause, Ma went on. "For example, I had a feeling that William knew more than he was lettin' on. So I asked him last night, and I was right."

"William" was my big brother Bill on the wrong side of Ma. "Right about what?" I asked.

Her lips drew back from her teeth for a minute and her eyes were steely. "Up till Wednesday, William was picking Libby up from summer school classes and driving her to meetings with that boy."

I couldn't believe it. "So Bill was helping her?"

Ma nodded grimly. "Your brother is weak. Libby asked him to, and he didn't have the gumption to say no. Last night he spilled everything. He told me that Libby didn't meet that boy Wednesday, like she said.

They met two weeks ago. She brought him here Wednesday night because she was going to ask us to let him stay in the extra bedroom till he could find a job. Supposably he was quitting the carnival so he could stay in Detroit."

"Wow. Daddy ain't heard all this, has he?"

Ma held up a work-worn hand. "Your daddy must never know. He is very poorly. He don't need aggravation."

And God knows we don't need him aggravated, I thought. "What are you gonna do, Ma?"

"I thought about forbidding her to see Herndon. But Jane Lee says if you forbid a teenager to date someone, she'll turn right around and do it anyhow."

Jane Lee was a local advice columnist whose counsel Ma ranked just below that of the Gospels. "Jane Lee knows best," I said, echoing what Ma herself had said down through the years.

She ignored the sarcasm. "Bill swears he stopped helping Libby as of Wednesday. That's all the help I can expect out of him. For the rest, I'm looking to you."

I gaped. "Me?"

"You," Ma said in a cold voice. "I want you to find out for sure if they're still seeing each other. If they are—" She stopped abruptly and took a deep breath before going on. "If

they are, then you will find a way to break it up, and get him out of Libby's life for good."

I sat there in our kitchen, listened to the silence, felt the pressure, impaled on a dilemma. On the one hand, I'd been brought up to obey my parents instantly and without question. On the other hand, I wanted no part of Libby's messes. And I was not, as Uncle Dan said, a punk kid any more. I was practically a grown man now, tired of taking orders. Plus, I only had a week before I went to work afternoons at the Rouge. My free time was running short, and I didn't want to waste any of it making like some kind of half-assed Richard Diamond, Private Eye.

Forget it, old lady, I said silently. Find yourself another patsy.

My mother said, "I'm not asking you for your daddy's sake, or for my sake. It's for Libby's sake." She pressed her lips. "That boy is trouble. I just know it. Libby's too young. She's strong-headed. Rash. Reckless."

Here goes, I thought. "Ma, I'm—I wouldn't know where to start." Good going, big man, I thought, disgusted. Good thing Fast Eddie and the Bubbas weren't there to hear me.

She smiled at me. "You'll find a way. You'll do it because you're my boy, and because I'm

asking you to, hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You do as I say, now."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Take care of your baby sister."

"Yes, ma'am."

I locked up my Ford and joined Fast Eddie walking with a cluster of other customers up the long grassy meadow toward the carnival entrance. Thin-as-a-straw Eddie wore all black, as usual, and carried his Gibson acoustic slung by its black embroidered strap over his shoulder. He surveyed the sky with his dark eyes and held out his hands tentatively. "Think it might rain?"

"That's the chance you take, dummy, carrying that guitar around. What's it for, anyways?"

"Chicks," he said, his thin face wolflike.

"Well, you're on your own on that. I'm here to track down this Jimmy Herndon fella."

"I still don't get it, Benjy. What's talking to Herndon gonna get you?"

"I'm going to ask him if he's gonna hang around or leave town. If he's leaving town, our troubles are over. If he's hanging around, well—I'll have to figure out what to do then."

We got in line at the carnival admission booth. Fast Eddie studied me. "What's with you

and the chicks department, Benjy? Having yourself a celibate summer?"

"I'm doing just fine, thanks," I growled, digging into my pocket for money.

Fast Eddie laughed. "You mean Debbie Miller? Your momma was telling me little Deb's got the hots for you. What a howl!"

"Forget it, man. She's ugly, she's stupid, and she's only fifteen."

"So, what's the problem?"

As such operations go, the carnival wasn't very big. Its dozen rides included a rickety roller coaster, dodge 'em cars, a merry-go-round, a couple of pivoting saucer rides, and the inevitable Ferris wheel. Organ music shrilled from worn-out speakers, and the humid air was drenched with the scent of sawdust, beer, and animal dung.

We hit the midway, which stretched out colorfully the length of a football field, flanked with booths manned by loud, practiced carnies. There weren't many customers. Some of the booths had none at all. It was perfect, but I didn't feel all that good. I was hung over, for one thing; as usual, Fast Eddie, the Bubbas, and I had put away a case of tall boys the night before. On top of that I was nervous. I'd never done this kind of thing. I didn't know where to begin. Oh well, I thought, just

dive in and fake it.

"Over here, Fast," I said, gesturing us toward one of the carny booths. This was a sort of ring-toss game. You threw rubber rings at cases full of long-necked bottles. If you got a ring to stick over a bottle neck, you won a prize. The catch, of course, was that the rings were just barely big enough to fit over the necks, and the bottles were not seated solidly in the cases.

I ambled up to the counter. It was manned by a wizened, deeply tanned man in a baggy blue Truman shirt, ball cap, and loose pants. His face looked like it had collapsed on itself; it had no substance at all except for the wad of chew in his left cheek. As I approached, he sang, "Yes sir, yes sir, win a big prize today, win a big prize. Two chances for a thin dime, five for a quarter. What'll it be, young fella?"

"Hi," I said, grinning at him. "I'm looking for Herndon. Jimmy Herndon."

"This ain't the missing persons bureau. How many chances you want, now?"

"I don't want any. Look, I know Herndon works here at the carnival. Where is he?"

The carny stepped back and glared at me, tiny points of light burning in his remote eyes. "You're blocking paying customers. Pay up and play, or move on, kid."

I glanced around. No one else was there. Not even Fast Eddie. Bored already, he'd wandered across the fairway to the Rifle Range and was chatting with the overweight blonde who ran it. She beamed at him in a way that women never beamed at me, and I felt the resentment that went back to when Fast and I were six: *how in hell does he do it?*

I glared at the carny. "There's nobody else here, mister. Now I asked you a question. Help me out and I'll be on my way."

The sawed-off ball bat came up with blinding speed, swung down and smashed the counter top. I nearly jumped out of my shoes. The carny raised the bat again and waggled the business end like Rocky Colavito, staring hotly at me. "You heard me!" he screamed. "Get moving!"

I gulped. "Okay, okay. No offense." I backed away from the booth. Several other customers were staring at me. The other carnies paid no attention at all. Fast Eddie had vanished. So had the blonde lady.

I continued up the midway. Gradually my heartbeat got back under control. Big deal, I told myself. You ran into a hard nose first time out. Keep trying. Someone will come across.

Wrong. I worked the midway for better than an hour. I talked to carnies, concessions people,

roughnecks and drivers. Leaving out the ball bat part, they were as cooperative as the ring-toss man. Never heard of Jimmy Herndon. Get moving, kid. Mind your own business.

They were lying. I was sure of it. But, I thought as I retraced my route down the midway, there's no way to prove it. Dead end. I walked on, bound for the exit, wondering where Fast Eddie was, wondering what to do now—

"Hey, Benjy!"

I turned. Fast Eddie gave me the come-on wave. I trotted toward him. "What's up, Fast?"

He looked excited. "Come here. Quick, before she changes her mind." He led me between two of the carny booths. Behind the midway was a sprawling grassy area parked full of trucks. One of them, a big panel job, sat facing me with its tail doors swung open. Sitting on the bumper was the blonde woman I'd seen Fast talking with earlier. She was smoking a cigarette and looked nervous. "This is my friend Erma," Eddie said. "Erma, this is Benjy. Now tell him what you told me."

Erma's close-cropped hair hadn't always been blonde. She stretched a cowgirl outfit and big tall boots, and was ten years and fifty pounds ahead of Eddie, not that it made any difference to him. She scanned me indifferently, glanced around,

then said in a low voice, "Jimmy Herndon was a roughneck here at the carnival."

I glanced at Fast. He was beaming. "I know that," I told her. "Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Tell him the story, Erma," Fast Eddie said.

She shut her eyes tightly for a minute. Then: "There was a big brawl last week in a bar up on U.S. 12 somewhere. A man got knifed. Throat cut, bled to death. Jimmy was there. Word is, he did it. He's hiding out. Cops are after him. He don't dare show his face around here."

"Nice guys your little sister hangs out with, Benjy," Fast noted:

"Shut up." I leaned close to Erma. She smelled of makeup and sweat. "You sure about this, Erma?"

"Swear to God." Her eyes flickered. "We're not supposda talk about him. Bad for business."

"I'll just bet." I stood. "Any idea where he went?"

She shook her head and inhaled on her cigarette jerkily. "I don't know, and I don't want to know. Jimmy Herndon is slick and tricky and pure trouble all the way through. You boys stay clear of him."

"We can't," I said, putting all the tough I could into my voice. "Him and me, we got business."

She smiled sadly. "Then be

careful, boys. Be plenty damn careful."

After thinking it over, I decided to park in the lot of the Michigan Bank, across Grand River from Redford High. I couldn't park too close or Libby would spot me. I couldn't park too far away or I'd miss her. This was perfect. Hopefully.

As I waited, the radio whispered the three o'clock news: Tshombe, Katanga, the Democratic Convention, and today's All Star Game. It was a warm and muggy Monday, had rained earlier and would again. I smoked a Camel cigarette and thought about what I was doing. I'd bombed out with Herndon. Now to go at it from the other end. Follow Libby and see where she went.

Gaggles of kids left the building as summer school classes let out. When I spotted Libby, she was walking east along the sidewalk on Grand River, about to cross Westbrook. Headed away from home.

When she stopped in front of Sock's Texaco amid a mixed group of whites and Negroes, I realized she was waiting for a bus. I put out my cigarette and started the car. Libby didn't seem anxious or furtive. She wore a generously cut pleated shirtdress in light blue, with a big wide belt and sandals, and

carried her textbooks as if they weren't important.

A DSR bus came along and roared to a stop. I wheeled my car into one of the eastbound lanes of Grand River as the bus gobbled up its passengers and continued toward the distant skyline of downtown Detroit.

The radio began to croon Percy Faith's "Theme from 'A Summer Place.'" I'd heard it to death already. I twirled the knob to the next station: Elvis doing "Stuck on You." Much better. I kept the left lane of Grand River, and followed the bus at the thirty-five mph speed limit. The back ad panel advertised Channel 7, WXYZing, Detroit's Big Station.

I wondered where the hell my sister was going.

The bus stopped at every major cross street. Each time I hugged the curb, watching fruitlessly for Libby as people got on and off. We passed near the National Food Store where I worked and I flipped it the finger as we went by, knowing I was out of there in less than a week. St. Mary's Catholic, Ward's and Penney's, the Bow Wow Coney Island, the Belshaw plant. Traffic was light, but the speed limit was thirty now and we crawled. Winkelman's, Sears, Charlie's Cadillac and Dawson Edsel; downtown was rising before my eyes and still no Libby—

I damn near blew it. The bus stopped across from the Riviera Theatre; I watched the disembarking passengers idly and then scanned the marquee: *A Tall Story* starring Tony Perkins and Jane Fonda. When the bus moved on, I did too, and belatedly spotted Libby half-jogging across Grand River headed for the front of the theater.

Cursing myself, I U-turned in front of Kresge's and came back as several homebound commuters honked angrily. Libby was not in sight. One thing I knew for sure: she didn't need to come all the way down here for movies, not with the Redford Theatre right around the corner from our house.

I gingerly turned north on Riviera Street. Libby was half a block away, crossing the narrow street toward the front of a gaunt, gray, two story apartment building. As I rolled slowly that way, she went inside. I pulled into the Riviera Theatre's parking lot across from the apartment building, drove down to the end, and parked by a tree.

Wesson Apartments was engraved in stone above the door. The building filled the corner of Riviera and Yosemite streets, a modest looking neighborhood. I didn't know anybody down here. I wondered who in the hell Libby knew down here. I wondered what she was doing in

there. Several times I opened my door, ready to go find out. Each time I shut the door and waited some more.

An endless, fidgety hour later, Jimmy Herndon came out of the Wesson Apartments with his arm around my sister. They kissed, he waved, and she walked away toward Grand River, stride bouncy, arms embracing her books.

I fired up the Ford and laid a hot streak of rubber as I swerved onto Riviera Street and rolled abreast of Libby. Her eyes widened when she saw me; then she looked resolutely ahead as she walked. "Go away, Benjy."

I kept my tone reasonable. "Need a ride, don't you?"

"I'm fine. Now go away."

I babied the Ford along, keeping even with Libby. "Come on, hop in," I said. "You really don't want to ride that sweaty old bus all the way home, do you?"

She looked at me suspiciously; then tossed her head in what passed for acceptance. I stopped the Ford, she crossed in front and got in. I managed to keep the lid on till we'd turned the corner and were part of the westbound rush up Grand River.

"You're not seeing that son of a bitch no more, Libby Perkins, or I'll break both your arms for ya, I swear to God!"

"I'll see him all I want!" she shouted back. "And you got no right to spy on me."

I calmed myself with difficulty. "Listen. Herndon's trouble. He done got into a knife-fight, and somebody died, and the cops are after him."

I did not get the expected shocked silence. "He didn't kill anybody," Libby came back readily. "It was all a big mixup. An accident. They're just picking on him."

"How come you know so much about it?" She didn't answer. "Don't tell me you were *with* him when it happened."

She shrugged and began to play with the window crank, mouth ugly. "What about you? You're not exactly Mister Simon Pure yourself. I've smelled beer on your breath, plenty a times. And I know you're weed-in' off every chance you get. And you prob'ly got some kind of trashy girlfriend stashed away somewhere."

"I'm seventeen," I said. "Makes all the difference."

"No," she shot back. "You're a boy and I'm a girl. *That's* the difference." She turned on the radio. It was playing "Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini." I shut it off on the third beat. Libby scowled and went on, "Mama put you up to this. She thinks just 'cause I'm a girl that I can't handle things. Well, I can. Every damn bit as well as you."

Silence prevailed till I made the turn onto Burgess, three

blocks from home.

Libby said softly, "You just forget what you saw today. If you snitch to Mama and Daddy, I'll say you're a liar."

"Stay away from him, Libby."

"You can't stop me. Mama and Daddy can't stop me." She smiled. "Nobody can stop me. Nobody at all."

As we turned onto our street, I waved at Mrs. Wilder, and she waved back from her porch swing.

"So," Fast Eddie said from the shotgun seat, "we gonna thump some rump this afternoon or what, men?"

I slowed the '51 to a stop in front of Sun Ya's on Grand River as the radio played "Cathy's Clown." "We're just gonna reason with Mr. Herndon. That's all."

Fast grinned at me and jerked a thumb toward the back seat. "Is that why we're bringing along all this Bubba-beef? Because they're so articulate?"

I glanced in the rear view. The Bubbas filled the back seat with biceps, shoulders, football jerseys, and identical grins. "Reason with him," one of them said. "Damn straight," chimed in the other.

Their real names were Joe and Frank Szewczklieuski. But everybody had referred to them as Bubba, both singular and

plural, almost as far back as I could remember. The handle was hung on them by my daddy. Being, like everyone else, unable to tell them apart, he was uncomfortable calling them Joe or Frank. And he never could learn how to pronounce their last name, no matter how patiently we tutored him. One day in frustration he called them Bubba, and it stuck.

It was a hot, sunny Tuesday noon. I'd worked the morning at the grocery and then collected the guys for our little visit to Jimmy Herndon. Libby was safely in summer school so I figured the coast was clear. My reasoning was, if I couldn't talk her out of him, maybe I could encourage him out of her.

The light changed to green, the song changed to "You're Gonna Miss Me," and the topic changed to the Detroit Tigers: sorry as hell, tied for fifth with the Washington Senators and going nowhere fast. I lighted a Camel and joined the bad-mouthing, which went from baseball to women, to beer to women; to Fast Eddie's new band to women, and from there, neatly, to beer.

"Hey, Ben," a Bubba said, "tall boys Saturday night."

"Your turn to buy," the other chimed in.

"Damn, that's right," I said. "Guess I'll be hitting the usual source. If I can catch Denny on

duty. He still doesn't card, does he?"

"Nah," Fast Eddie said, "but I think he's on vacation."

"I'll figure it out," I vowed. "Don't worry, guys. It's only Tuesday. By Saturday, a case of tall boys will be ours."

We crossed Livernois; on the home stretch now. Fast Eddie rubbed his hands together. "I think we ought to take Hern-don in an alley and lay waste to his face."

Eddie's zeal would have been disquieting if it were not so suspect. "Just let me do the talking, Fast," I said. "Y'all are along for moral support and that's all."

"You guys hold him," Fast said ominously, "and I'll hit him."

I rounded the corner and pulled into the half-full parking lot of the Riviera Theatre. We parked, got out, and crossed Riviera Street, making for the doorway of the Wesson Apartments. We'd just hit the sidewalk when Fast Eddie said blandly, "Hey, guys, I better stay out here and watch the car."

The Bubbas snickered. I glared at Eddie. "What do you mean, 'watch the car'? It ain't going nowhere."

He was already heading back. "I'll just sit on the hood and scare off the thieves. You guys have fun."

He waltzed away, whistling a cheerful tune. "Come on, guys," I muttered to the Bubbas.

The foyer of the Wesson was small, airless, and empty except for a row of metal mailboxes nailed to the cheap plaster wall. Each box had a name and not one of them was Herndon.

"What now?" I asked the Bubbas. Their only reply was a shared grin. I had a brainstorm. "Come on," I said, and led them to an apartment door. A brisk knock brought the face of a small busty woman with loose dentures, a small mustache, and a hairnet. "Yaaaassssss?" she asked, wobbling.

"Looking for Jimmy Hern-don, ma'am," I said. "He lives in the building here. Big beefy guy? Blond? Works the carnival?"

"Upstairs," she said with a Smirnoff accent. "Try upstairs, the door with the Tigers decals." She slammed the door.

"Now we're cooking," I said. The Bubbas trailed me like a herd of steer, up a flight of narrow wood stairs to the second floor. I knocked on the door and it swung open obligingly.

I damn near swallowed my tongue.

It was a small one-room apartment with windows looking out over Yosemite Street.

The Murphy bed was held down by the stark naked Jimmy Herndon, who gaped at us through the smoke of his cigarette, and a trim young dark-haired woman who, I realized as she gave a strangled "Eep!" and tried to cover herself, was not Libby.

"Excuse us," the Bubbas said in unison, having been raised to be polite.

"Want to talk to you, Herndon," I said sternly.

The big man's good-living face went sour for a second as he recognized me. "Oh, jeez. Okay. I'll see you in the hall there in a second, kid."

"Make it quick," I said threateningly, and pulled the door shut. "Hey, Bubba, trot on out there on Yosemite and make sure our little buddy doesn't slip out the window, okay?" One of them took off, clomping heavily down the stairs.

I lighted a Camel and smoked nervously. After a moment the apartment door opened and Jimmy Herndon came out, zipping up his pants. He grinned at me. "You're Benjy, right?"

"Ben. Ben Perkins. And you know why I'm here, so let's get on with it."

"Get on with what?" he asked pleasantly. His eyes clicked once to Bubba and then back to me, undisturbed.

"You and Libby. I want to hear you say that it's over."

"Well, okay. It's over. How's that, Benjy?"

His grin had not wavered. I dropped my cigarette to the floor and slowly crushed it out, feeling my heart pound and fists knot. "You smart-mouthin' me?"

He showed me palms. "No," he said deliberately. "Now don't get riled. I meant what I said. Libby and I are all through."

I loosened my hands marginally. "You give me your word on that?"

"Absolutely. Look, Ben—you don't mind if I call you Ben, do you?" He hooked a hand over my shoulder and led me slowly up the hall. "I like Libby. I really do. But she really is too young for me. I'm breaking it off. I'd already planned to, even before today."

"I see."

Herndon looked me straight in the eye. "As it happens, I'm leaving town for good. Tonight. So I'll be out of the picture. Fair enough?"

"Yeah. Okay." I gestured to Bubba. "Don't disappoint me, now," I warned Herndon.

"Don't worry, Benjy. I won't."

The rain was dumping in buckets the next afternoon as I sloshed the Ford up Lahser on my way home from work. I'd put in ten hours at the grocery and I was whipped, grimy, and

grumpy. My boss, whom I'd unwisely nicknamed Hitler, had been giving me the crappiest jobs in the place ever since I told him I was going to work at Ford's. Plus I was jumpy, wondering what kind of explosion waited for me at home. It had been twenty-four hours since my talk with Jimmy Herndon, more than enough time for Libby to find out that he was gone.

A familiar figure waved an umbrella to me from under the awning of Jim's Sweet Shop. I sloshed the Ford to the curb as my mother ran to the car, opened the door and piled in, dragging her umbrella behind her. "Lord have mercy, it's enough to strangle frogs! Thank you, Benjy."

"No problem, Ma." I wheeled the Ford away from the curb. "So, how's things around the house?"

"Things?" she asked absently as she glanced inside her prescription bag. Then she arched a brow. "Oh. Things. Well, son, I reckon *things* are just fine."

"In the baby sister department?" I asked carefully. "What's she been up to?"

"Nothing special. Came straight home from school, like yesterday. Studied awhile. Then went out with her girlfriends. There's a new movie at the Redford over there, something with Dick Clark." She must have taken my silence for skepti-

cism, because she added, "I know that's where Libby went. I walked up here with her and her friends, since it was right on the way to Kinsel's for your daddy's prescription."

"Well, good," I said uneasily, swinging right onto Bennett.

"I don't know what you did, son, but whatever it was, it seems to've worked. I'm much obliged." She looked at me and wrinkled her nose. "Heavens mercy, what is that stench on you, Benjamin?"

"Hot sauce. Had to clean up a busted case of it."

She had her eagle eye on. "And those shoes! Why in the world did you wear those sorry old shoes to work?"

"Couldn't find my other ones. Looked everywhere."

She snorted. "You're too young to be going senile. First your pants, now your shoes."

"Sorry, Ma." I slowed down for our driveway. "I've had a lot on my mind."

She smiled at me. "I know. It was unfair of me, imposing on you the way I did. But I'm not sorry. You fixed it and it's over and I'm grateful, Benjy. Right grateful."

I wished I could be as positive as she.

But everything stayed calm. At least as calm as it ever was around our house. Daddy came home mean as a snake from a run-in with his boss at the cas-

ket company, and had another tantrum when the news came over that Kennedy had, as expected, been nominated. Libby returned from her movie and ate dinner with the family. Then she spent the evening curled up on the living room couch, industriously studying her English. She was in a fine mood. I began to think that maybe Ma was right. Maybe the Herndon episode was over. Maybe Libby would pass her remedial courses and go on to tenth grade in the fall and life would return to whatever passed for normal around our place.

I wanted to believe it. I had my own life to live, and only a few days left before hitting the line at Ford's. I wanted to cruise in my Deluxe Tudor, maybe turtle-race down Woodward Avenue, four cars abreast doing ten miles per hour; gobble Big Chief burgers at the Totem Pole, catch the Tigers playing the Yankees at Briggs Stadium this weekend, and, of course, have at least one more session guzzling Stroh's tall boys with Eddie and the Bubbas, assuming I could find a supplier.

But in the end I had to make sure.

I stood before the apartment door and took a deep breath as the Wesson Apartments breathed silently around me.

For the dozenth time since getting up that Thursday morning I wondered if I was being extra dumb, coming down here alone. But, I reminded myself, Herndon didn't seem all that tough. Big guy, for sure, with some experience on him, but mostly mouth. All lard and no hard, as my daddy would have said. I wouldn't need the Bubbas to handle him. If in fact he was still here.

I knocked on the door. After a moment it eased back, held cautiously by the dark-haired woman I'd seen Herndon with the last time. She wore a mint Grecian-sleeve dress with a polka dot sash around her slender waist. Her hair was pixie short and so was she: shapely but slight with the wiry build of a dancer. "You," she greeted me.

I wanted to tell her she looked better with clothes on, but caught myself in time. Not very nice, and untrue, besides. "Me," I answered, grinning. "Where's Herndon at?"

"Not here. Who cares where?" She smiled crookedly. "I sure as the dickens don't. I threw him out." She stepped into the hallway and pulled the door to. At my expression her face hardened and she pushed the door back open. "You want to search the place? Go ahead!"

"If I wanted to, babygal, I would." The line sounded better

in my head than it did out loud. "What'd Herndon do, find somewhere else to live?"

"Somewhere else?" she mimicked sourly. "He never lived here. Hung around some, you know? But he never spent the night. We had some laughs, okay? But nothing big-time."

"Seen him lately?"

"You deaf or something? I threw him out, I toldja." As she looked at me, I saw that her eyes, outlined in black, were the exact color of her dress. "The other day when you were here, I listened through the door. That's how I found out about him and your sister. That tore it. I never planned to marry the bum, but I wasn't going to be part of any harem, either."

"Any idea where he went?"

"If he was smart, he got out of Detroit. Cops are looking for him. You knew that, huh? I called 'em myself to let them know he'd been seen in the neighborhood here. Maybe they caught him, ever think of that?"

Nope. Not hardly. "Sure I did," I said importantly. "I'm stopping by the precinct right after this."

"Uh-huh." Her hips swayed slightly as she gave me the cool green once-over. "When you're done with all that, whyn't you come back and buy me a drink or something?"

"Wish I could," I said, taken by surprise. "But I'm, uh, more

or less seeing somebody, you know?"

"At least you're honest," she said, which made me feel guilty. She walked with exaggerated grace back into her apartment and smiled and winked at me over her shoulder. "I hope she knows how lucky she is," she said before closing the door between us.

I idled the Ford at the Schoolcraft traffic light. On the opposite corner sat the C & H Party Store. I wondered if they'd card me if I strolled in and bought a case. I had no idea, and I had no time now. But I'd have to figure the beer thing out pretty soon. Saturday was only two days off.

But I had something bigger on my mind than the need for a case of tall boys. It was a feeling I'd never had before, not quite this way. The feeling that something was going on behind the scenes. That a great big fast one was being pulled.

That I was being had.

"He never spent the night here," his ex-girlfriend had told me. Then where the hell was he living, between the knife fight and now? Had I even thought to ask her? Nooooo.

"She was going to ask us to let him stay in the extry bedroom," Ma had told me. Of course, the negotiation had never gotten that far, thanks to my calm, cool, collected daddy.

And Libby had been acting awfully happy last night for a hotheaded girl whose first great love had ankled her.

The light greened and I geared the Ford up to high, half watching my driving. "There's trouble in this house," Ma had said. Yeah. Things hadn't been right. I'd been waking up a lot lately in the dead of night. I'd attributed that to the jitters—starting work at Ford's would be no picnic, I knew—but what if . . .

That morning I'd been unable to find my prized Redford High baseball jersey. And Bill had complained about missing a jacket. Either the laundry chute was eating our clothes, or Ma was going senile, or—

"Jesus Christ," I murmured. I sailed through the red light at Greenfield without even thinking about it. Could anybody be that brazen?

By the time I reached our neighborhood, I'd decided what to do. It was wild-assed crazy, but it just might work—if I could only talk Debbie Miller, my local admirer, into going along.

She appeared, a ghostly, whitish-gray, faceless figure, behind the rippled glass of the porch door, and clicked the latch open. As I pulled the door, she put a finger to her lips and shook her head. I nodded. She turned and

led me through the inner door into the house, through the kitchen, and up the carpeted back stairway.

The house had the sweet, foreign smell of strangers and was pitch black and thickly silent except for the faint tread of our feet echoing mutely on the old floorboards. My heart was racing, and I was pumped and primed and as ready to go as if it were nine in the morning instead of just past midnight. God alone knew what the next hour or so would bring.

Debbie closed her bedroom door behind us and faced me. In the faint light of her bedside lamp, I saw that she wore white full-length cotton pajamas over pink bunny slippers. Atop that she wore a white satiny quilted robe that reached from her ankles all the way up to a big button at her throat. She was about as physically inviting as a Bar-colounger, which, I discerned in her opening comments, was no accident.

"Don't you lay a hand on me, Benjy Perkins!" she whispered sharply, gray eyes hard.

I sighed. So much for the big crush she supposedly had on me. Just as well. "That's not why I'm here," I whispered patiently. "I explained all that."

"Better not be. I'm not like that Beth Heinzeroth, sneaking boys into her house to do God knows what. I must be nuts to

be doing this. I'm a good girl."

"I know. So listen, why'n't you keep yourself busy or something, while I do what I got to do? Go to sleep if you want. I don't know how long this'll take."

She rolled her eyes. "No, thank you. I'll just stay awake till you're done with whatever strange business you're mixed up in. There's the window. Help yourself. And keep it quiet or you'll wake my folks—and you know what that means."

I went to the window, pulled back the drapes, and notched the blinds. Across the narrow adjoining back yards, beyond a copse of trees, I could see the back side of our house, half black and half silvery in the moonlight. Behind me, I heard bedsprings creak as Debbie arranged herself Indian-style against her headboard. I glanced back at her and she raised her chin and stared at me defiantly. I made what I hoped was an innocent, reassuring smile, turned back to the window, knelt and looked out and watched, waiting for something to happen.

An hour went by like that. Nothing happened outside. Inside was another story. Debbie just couldn't sit still. She flipped through magazines and paced, cleared her throat and smothered yawns, and gave me a clenched-jawed steely-eyed stare whenever I dared to look at her.

I was silently composing a speech in which I foreswore, for all time, any and all interest in her body, when I caught a motion outside at the northeast corner of our house.

It was Libby. She wore jeans and a sweater and nothing on her bare feet showing white against the grass. It was in the low fifties that night, cool for July, and she hugged herself as she walked purposefully in the moonlight to the double doors that covered the cement stairs leading down into our cellar.

As I stared, I felt disbelief. I also felt something else, something new: pure cold joy. Got you, you bastard. I got you, got you, got you.

Libby bent and gave the cellar door three taps. After a moment it rose a couple of inches. She opened it the rest of the way, stepped over the threshold and followed the steps down, swallowed up in the deeper blackness as the cellar door dropped shut behind her.

Now! I thought fiercely. Now to settle some hash! I stood abruptly. Debbie jumped. "What is it?" she whispered.

"Christmas time. Got to go, sweetheart." I headed for the door. "You stay here. I know the way out. And thanks, kid. You done good."

She stood, nervously tugging the robe tightly around her. "I thought you'd be here longer."

"Long enough. Go on, get some sleep." I opened the bedroom door.

She licked her lips. "I enjoyed it," she ventured.

I waved and stepped out. As I pulled her door shut, I distinctly heard one whispered word: "Bastard."

I closed the porch door silently behind me and moved at a fast trot across the Millers' back yard. In the weeds behind their trash barrel I found the Louisville Slugger I'd hidden there earlier. I hefted it and held it at my side as I crept around the copse of trees as quietly as I could. Too late. I heard the cellar doors creak shut and caught a glimpse of Libby rushing back the way she'd come. She'd been down there five minutes, tops.

Well, well. Now this would work even better. I crouched in the cool, damp grass, leaning on the bat, and counted to six hundred, plenty long enough for Libby to get inside, up the stairs, and into her room, out of harm's way. Then I stood and walked across our lawn, ducking under the clotheslines as I made for the cellar doors.

There I froze a moment. Not a sound from anywhere. I had to do this smart and quiet. I thought it through, then bent and tapped on the cellar door three times, just as Libby had.

After a moment the door rose an inch or so. I stood facing out, with my back against the house, waiting and watching, as it closed. I bent and tapped on it again. Stepped back and hoisted the bat this time, cocked and ready.

The cellar door rose, opening wider and wider, revealing a male arm and then a blond head as Jimmy Herndon ventured up the stairs, back to me. He'd just uttered the first syllable of Libby's name when the fat of my Louisville ball bat thonked him squarely above his right ear.

He collapsed as if switched off, splattering down onto the stairs. I dropped the bat, bent and took him under the damp armpits of his T-shirt and began to drag him out. He weighed a ton, but I didn't have far to haul him, and I was feeling too proud of myself to care. I'd done it. I'd taken out the villain, like Richard Diamond, Sundance, Roger and Smith, Peter Gunn—guys like that.

Finally the gagging and retching stopped. I had both big windows of my '51 Ford open to the cool night air pouring in as I drove down the silent desertion of Grand River, but even that wasn't enough to dull the stench from the back seat.

"You had to do that, huh," I

growled. "Ya had to puke in my brand-new second-hand car. Thanks a whole lot."

"You were the one who hit me, kid," Herndon said hoarsely. "You get slugged in the head, you puke."

All I knew was, it certainly wasn't something that happened to Richard Diamond, Sundance, Roger and Smith, Peter Gunn—guys like that. "Should of told me," I said. "I'd have stopped so you could do it on the street like everybody else."

"Sorry," he said, tone wholly sincere. "Mind if I come up there?"

"I don't care."

"You're not going to hit me any more?"

"As long as you're peaceable I won't."

Jimmy Herndon stuffed himself over the seat into the front and arranged himself as far from me as he could get. I followed the night-blanketed street as it lanced toward the heart of Detroit, doing about sixty, catching the synchronized lights perfectly. After a moment Herndon asked, "Where you taking me?"

"The train station. You promised to leave town," I said sourly. "I'm holding you to it."

"That's just fine, Ben. I really appreciate it—"

"Just shut the hell up!" I shouted. "Quit acting like you're

anything but a crooked, devious, sleazy son of a bitch, okay?"

"I'm not all that bad."

"Aren't, huh? You been sneaking around with my sister. You been sleeping in the basement of my house every night. You had a whole bag of our clothes ready to take with you. And you're wanted for knifing a guy. If that ain't bad, what is it?"

"Survival." His smile was not kind. "Maybe when you're older, you'll understand what I mean."

I swung right on 14th Street. It was foggier down here, the street lights misty on the fronts of darkened houses and stores. "Well," I said, "this-here punk kid done took you out, pal. And I could make things even worse, as in turning you over to the cops. But I don't need the cops to fix you. It'd be too easy, somehow. There's a lot more satisfaction in running your ass out of town personally."

He absently rubbed his head where I'd hit him. "You're giving me a real break, kid. Thanks."

"No thanks needed. It ain't Christian charity. I just don't want my sister drug through the mud with you, hear?"

He was smiling at me. "You really are a pretty four-square guy, Ben. If there's something I can do for you before I leave, to make amends, just name it."

"Yeah. Right," I snorted. "At one thirty on a Friday morning." We were driving through a neighborhood of streets all named after trees. Nothing was open but the occasional bar. That gave me an idea. Yeah, right. Perfect!

As we reached Temple Street, I swerved the Ford over to the curb by a small building at the corner that said Temple Tavern. I put the brake on and dug in my pants pocket. "You want to make some kind of amends, go on inside there and buy me a case of Stroh's tall boys. Got it?"

I reached a five at him. He shook his head and came out of his pocket with a large wad of soft, often-folded currency. "Nope," he said firmly, "I'm covering it. Least I can do." He hopped out and strode into the tavern. Presently he appeared on the sidewalk again, embracing the case. I got out and opened the trunk; he put the clinking beer bottles inside.

Ten minutes later I delivered Jimmy Herndon to the Michigan Central Train Station, walked him inside, and watched him purchase a ticket to Chicago with several bills from his fat wad of soft currency.

When he completed the transaction, he turned to me, grinning. "Train leaves at six," he said. "Gonna wait around and wave a hankie as I depart?"

"Maybe I should. To make sure you go."

"Oh, I'll go. I promise." He looked around the cavernous train station lobby. "This town's too hot for me. I'm gone and I'll stay gone. You whipped me, Ben. I'm out of here."

I was exhausted. I was scheduled to do a twelve hour shift at the grocery, starting at six A.M. I had to get home and rescue what sleep I could. "Okay. Just don't let me see your face in these parts ever again."

Back behind the wheel of my '51, beating gears headed northwest for home through the misty night, I felt pretty damned good. I'd won. Libby had been smack in the middle of big trouble, and I'd sorted it out. It hadn't been pretty. I'd made mistakes. But I'd overcome every obstacle that appeared, and in the end I prevailed.

All for no reward—aside from the satisfaction of feeling like maybe I wasn't just a punk kid any more. . . .

The siren made me swerve and I nearly took out a lamp-post at the Outer Drive intersection. A cop car hung to my bumper, red bubblelight and headlights flashing angrily, punctuated by the whooping siren. Heart hammering, I hauled the Ford to a stop in front of the Christian Science church. Damn it to hell, I thought. Nailed.

Speeding. My first ticket.

The officer sauntered up to my door and peered down. "Benjy Perkins?" he asked, in what had to be one of the last Irish accents left on the force.

"Yessir." How the hell did he know my name?

"Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle, young feller?"

I did so, shaking. The cop took my upper arm and led me to the rear of the car. "Got anything special in the trunk, son?"

My homecoming was not pretty.

Daddy, who didn't bother to bail me out of the 16th Precinct till eight thirty the next morning, nearly ripped my head off. Mama met me at the door to inform me that I was the first member of the Perkins family ever to go to jail. My brother Bill, just leaving for work, shook his head ominously when he saw me. And Libby, my sweet little sister Libby, all angelic in her summer school clothes, tossed her head at my appearance and greeted me with "Morning, jailbird!"

I could handle Daddy and Mama and Bill. Time would take care of my problems with them. But I had to settle accounts with Libby. When she got home, late that evening, I barged into her bedroom and slammed the door. "We got to talk, Libby," I growled.

She was sitting at her dressing table, brushing her short brown hair. "What do you want, jailbird?"

"First off, cut out the name-calling. This jam I'm in is all on account of you."

Brush, brush. "Really? Did I put the beer in your car?"

"No." I stepped closer, about to lower the boom and grimly enjoying it. "I caught Herndon last night. Dragged him to the train station and ran him out of town. He knew about the beer and he called the cops on me, to pay me back."

The smile went. The brush stopped. Libby looked at it, turning it over and over. Then tears sprang into her eyes and she tossed the thing hard onto the dressing table. "You hoodlum!" she shouted, eyes hurt and angry. "How could you do that to him?"

"I'm the hood? What about him? He's the one who knifed somebody. He's—"

She buried her face in her arms, knocking stuff off the dressing table as she writhed. "I loved him and he loved me," she wailed. "He would have taken me with him. But you butted in before he could make the arrangements. You ruined everything."

"He didn't love you. Look at me, Libby. He had another girlfriend at those apartments the whole time. Look at me,

damn it! He wasn't going to take you with him. What would he do that for? He's ten years older than you. He was just using you, Libby! You were had, and I do mean had."

She kept crying. I went to her and put my hands on her shoulders. She whirled around with the hairbrush and nearly raked my eyes out with it. "Stay away from me," she hissed.

"All I ever wanted was to help," I shot back.

"I'm quits with you. You ruined my life. I will hate you as long as you live."

"You're breaking my heart!" I sneered.

She turned to the mirror. "We'll see how tough you are when Daddy finds out about the cash kitty."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I lent it to Jimmy," she said, resuming her brushing. "Two hundred and ten dollars. He was going to pay it back before he left town. But you fixed that, all right. He'll never pay it back now, and I wouldn't blame him."

I remembered the wad of soft currency from which Herndon had bought my tall boys. He must have laughed his ass off. "You expect me to take the rap for that? Get real. I'll tell Daddy what you did."

"Go ahead. Try. Who's Daddy going to believe? You're nothing but a jailbird. You can't

compete against his baby girl Elizabeth, so don't even bother to try."

She stood, gave herself one final inspection in the mirror, and walked out of the room.

And, for all practical purposes, out of my life. Down through the years, we've mostly met up at funerals. Daddy in '63. Mama in '67. The Bubbas in '70. Uncle Dan in '84. All gone.

So is the Riviera and the train station, both boarded up. National Foods is now a hardware store. The Totem Pole is a Burger King. Fourteenth Street is a war zone, and the Washington Senators became the Texas Rangers—prime competitors of the Detroit Tigers, who in the interim have been better and worse, then better, and are now worse.

The Wesson is still there. So is Redford High. Annie Wilder got divorced and moved away. I never did learn where. Debbie Miller became an English professor at the University of Michigan. My brother Bill married Marybeth and still works at Ford's. You know all about Fast Eddie Anger if you're into pop music at all.

By a very circuitous route, I ended up a private detective. Like Richard Diamond, Sundance, Roger and Smith, Peter Gunn—guys like that, sort of.

Fast Eddie was my client once. So, even, was Libby.

But it wasn't till tonight that I realized my very first client was my mother. Tonight, as I stood in the fairway of the Wayne County Fair, overrun with the memories triggered by the sight of the man running a ball-toss booth.

He stood behind the counter, twenty feet from me. He was too busy to notice as I stared at him, superimposing his image, etched clear in the bright lights of the County Fair midway, against the faded memories of three decades ago. Thirty pounds heavier. Hair grayish and wispy thin. Heavy lines had taken the face, and his bouncy swagger was gone. But it was definitely him.

I pictured myself going up to him. I had a lot of questions. Did he really knife someone? Did he ever get caught? How much jail time had he done in the intervening years? What was it like to be well past fifty and still roaming the country, working the shrinking carnival circuit for nickels and dimes? How many women had there been? How much money? How

many promises? Did he ever think about the broken hearts and hurt feelings he left in his wake?

The ball-toss went momentarily vacant and Herndon, as if signaled by radio, turned, looked at me, away, then back: locking his stare with mine. I grinned, remembering the sound of the bat as it hit his head. Now, all these years later, I wished I'd hit him harder—

"Ben! Hey, Ben?"

I turned. Will Somers, a muscular blond eight-year-old, galloped up to me, followed at a distance by my friend Carole Somers, great with child and looking tired. "Found the johns okay?" I asked.

"Finally," Carole said. "Who's that man over there?"

"Who?" I parried.

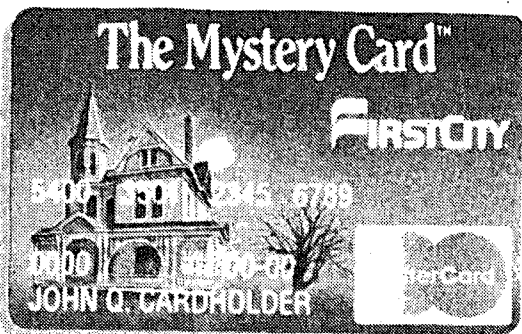
"That barker in the ball-toss booth. You were staring at him. Do you know him from somewhere?"

I glanced over at Herndon, whose eyes were still fixed on me. "Nobody important," I answered. I took Carole in one arm, Will in the other. "Come on, I'll buy you something to eat."

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UNSOLVED

by Lassiter Wren
and Randle McKay

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the April issue.*

It is well known that expert testimony on typewriting has decided important legal cases. Typewriting machines have individuality—not only machines of different makes, but different machines of the same make. A real typewriting expert can tell from the writing: the make, the particular model, the probable age of the machine (in usage), and many other interesting things. He can decide whether, as claimed, a certain document was typed on a certain machine. And with the aid of a microscope he can probably tell you the distinctive typing peculiarities of the typist who wrote the document.

The Simpson receipt case is not too complicated for the layman. The circumstances were as follows:

Simpson had borrowed three thousand dollars from Bloodgood, a rich friend. He gave Bloodgood a note dated September third, promising to pay within six months. Bloodgood would not take interest: the transaction was admittedly at Bloodgood's suggestion and initiative, the latter being wealthy and anxious to do favors to Simpson in the hope of social advancement.

Early in November Bloodgood died suddenly of heart failure on the street. When the administrators of his estate examined Bloodgood's papers, they found a memorandum of the note as follows:

"Simpson note in lower steel drawer. \$3,000.00—September 3, 1923."

And underneath these lines, another line which read:

"October 19—paid by Simpson on note, \$500.00."

The last line was in a different kind of ink, but both were in Bloodgood's handwriting. Unquestionably, the administrators concluded, Simpson still owed twenty-five hundred dollars on the note. They asked him if he would be prepared to settle on the required date, so that they might wind up the affairs of the estate as soon as possible.

To their amazement Simpson replied by claiming that he had paid twenty-five hundred dollars, not five hundred only, on the note, and in proof exhibited a signed receipt (reproduced below).

Simpson said that he had paid Bloodgood two thousand dollars on the evening of October 18th, and five hundred additional on the morning of October 19th. Bloodgood, he said, had been in a hurry upon the occasion of the first payment and had not given a receipt. Simpson said he did not like to press for it, although he would have been justified in demanding strict businesslike accounting, because Bloodgood was in such a hurry. Moreover, it had been agreed that Bloodgood was to come to Simpson's office the next morning to receive five hundred more. "Therefore," said Simpson, "I decided to wait till then and have a written receipt for the whole sum of payments I had made."

Bloodgood came to his office, Simpson said, as agreed and received the other five hundred. Both payments, he said, had been in cash. Bloodgood sat down himself at Simpson's typewriter, he asserted, and wrote out the receipt as exhibited, signing and dating it himself.

Received payment of.....\$500.00
making total amount paid to date \$2,500.00
against note for \$3,000.00, leaving
balance still due of.....\$500.00

S. S. Bloodgood
Oct. 19, 1923

The administrators were in a quandary. Bloodgood's carelessness with money and accounting was well known. He had been visiting Simpson's office frequently for months previous to his death. He knew how to use a typewriter and had often been observed using Simpson's machine for letters and memoranda which he wrote himself. The deceased, moreover, had been in the habit of carrying large sums on his person and his bank deposits for October 19th, 20th, and 21st showed nearly six thousand dollars. Had Bloodgood done as Simpson described, or was Simpson dishonest? Had Bloodgood forgotten to list the total of twenty-five hundred dollars paid on the note, writing five hundred dollars instead, in writing his private notation?

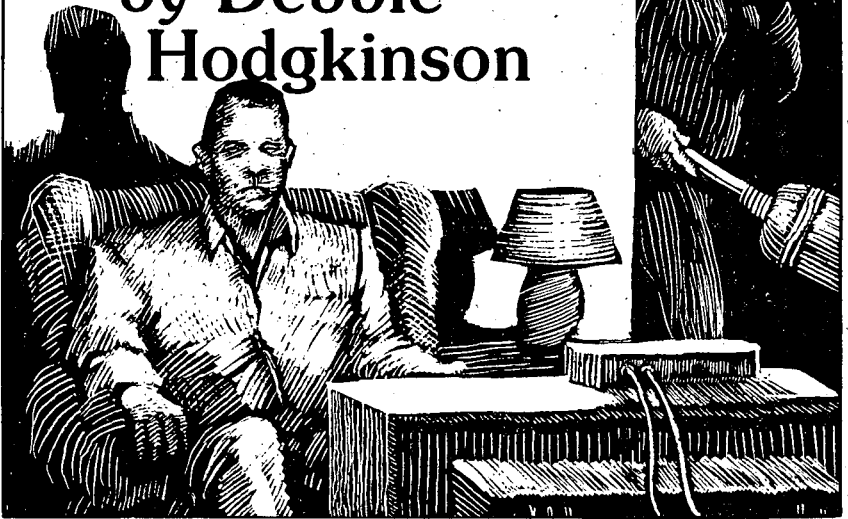
1. Was Simpson's receipt genuine?
2. What proves the truth?

See page 149 for the solution to the February puzzle.

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Part Time

by Debbie
Hodgkinson



Carol was reaching up into the cabinet for a teacup when a strange man walked in her back door and through the dining room into the living room.

"Hey there," he said as he passed.

Carol pulled her blue terrycloth robe tighter and retied the belt as she followed him around the corner.

"Who are you?" she demanded. She was more startled than frightened. She had never seen the man before, and there he sat in the morning sunshine on her rent-to-own sofa. "What do you think you're doing here?"

Carol's dog Mimi trotted in behind her and began to bark while backing under the dining room table.

The man looked at the noisy mongrel and looked up at Carol

standing in the doorway with her bare feet planted wide, knuckles on hips, her mouth wide open in indignation. The man's face was bland, his eyebrows raised in mild surprise. He stared Carol in the eye for a long moment, then reached out to the coffee table, picked up a news magazine, put the arches of his feet on the edge of the table, leaned back, and opened to the last page. Without speaking he began to read.

"Get out of here!" Carol was getting quite angry. When the man continued to read, she stepped across the room and snatched the slick magazine from his hands. He folded his arms across his stained jacket and looked at her another few seconds. His dirty tennis shoes still rested next to his small gym bag on her coffee table. He wore jeans and a black T-shirt. He could have been twenty-five, maybe thirty.

"Get out of my house right now," said Carol. "Mimi, shut up." The curly-haired brown dog paused and looked up, then began barking again.

"Bug off, lady." With a single motion the man stood, grabbed back the magazine, and reseated himself.

Carol turned and stomped toward the telephone on the wall by the back door, intending to call the police. She stopped with her hand on the receiver, feeling the beginning of panic as she remembered that the phone didn't work. That was why she was home today. She had traded shifts with another woman at work so she could stay home and wait for the telephone company repairman to come fix the outside line. Well, maybe she could pretend to call anyway, bluff the guy. If he believed the police were coming, maybe he would go away. It worked on TV often enough.

"Phone's still dead, right? I know, I tried to use it yesterday and I couldn't get a dial tone." He was watching her, no longer reading, but still holding the magazine on his lap. "Who you think you're gonna call, anyway?"

She turned to face him, but stayed as far away as she could. "What do you want? Why are you here?" Mimi moved closer to her, but stayed under the table, whining now.

"I come here every day. What's it to you?"

"What do you mean, what's it to me? Every day? This is my house! What do you do here? Go away!" The pitch of her voice was getting high enough to hurt her throat. She consciously lowered it, trying to sound calm and in control. "You have to leave. You have to leave now. Don't ever come back here again."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean no. I like it here."

"But this is my house. You can't just walk in and make yourself at home."

"Sure I can. You never lock the back door. The dog's usually in the back yard. He barks, but he can't get over the fence. Your neighbors are gone all day, or watching TV. Either they don't see me or they don't care. Or maybe they're used to me by now."

Carol stared at him. Replies came to her mind so fast that she couldn't sort them out sensibly. "But what do you want? Why are you here?" Her throat was tightening up again.

"Well, geez, lady, it's cold out. I want someplace I can sit down that's not on the ground. I want to watch a little Donahue, wash a load of clothes, take a shower. I wish you'd get some dandruff shampoo instead of that extra-body stuff, you know? Sometimes I make a little lunch, fry an egg, see what kind of leftovers there are. What do you think I want? I can use the phone. When it works. But I don't make no long distance calls, you know." He waited a moment, as if he expected her gratefully to acknowledge his restraint. When she failed to do so, he shrugged and opened the magazine again. "It's not like you're using the space. An' I don't take nothing you can't spare," he said in a miffed tone. He scooted lower on the couch and resumed reading.

Carol realized that her gesturing and stomping had loosened her bathrobe and it was threatening to open. She turn back into the kitchen to close it better and pull the belt into a tighter half knot. She leaned back against the broom closet door and closed her eyes. *He's making me feel like a bad hostess, and I don't even want him here! What am I going to do? I can't let him just stay there, but how am I going to get rid of him?* She heard claws clicking on the linoleum floor. Mimi walked over and touched Carol's calf with her wet nose, whined once. Carol ignored the urge to reach down and wipe her skin dry. She looked down at the dog, who looked back up at her. "I don't know, Mimi."

She took a deep breath and walked back around the corner to the edge of the living room rug. She tensed herself to speak. "Look, you have to leave. I don't want you here. I don't have anything worth stealing. No jewelry, no silver, not even a stereo. Well, okay, the TV. So take it; it's yours if you'll just go away. Please. Now."

"I don't want your crummy old black and white TV, lady. I just come here to kill time. Besides, I got to wait for the mail to come, so I can get my unemployment check. They always come on Thurs-

day. Sometimes Friday. So just leave me alone, okay? You ain't big enough to make me leave anyway. Don't be dumb." He sounded as if he was talking to a creepy kid sister.

The fear she felt surprised her. Of course he was right. She was not a bouncer capable of chucking him out. She was only average-sized for a woman, and she didn't know any karate tricks or anything like that. She was certain that he was stronger than she was.

For the first time, the possibility of rape occurred to her. That frightened her more than his scoffing tone, and she felt foolish and naive not to have thought of it sooner. True, he had made no move to attack her, only to invade her territory, but she was alone, and weak, and words were definitely not working against him. She turned, stumbled over Mimi, and walked with a rush back through the kitchen, out the other end into the short hallway, and into her bedroom. She held the door open for a moment to let Mimi follow her in, then shut it and threw the puny brass bolt.

She pushed aside the loose blankets on the bed and sat down facing her reflection in the dresser mirror. Mimi hopped up beside her and squeezed in under Carol's right elbow. Carol rested her arm on the dog's back and began scratching the curls behind Mimi's ears. She never looked directly at the dog, only watched their reflection in the mirror. Mimi whined and tried to lick Carol's face. Carol pulled back out of range, without being fully aware of the reflex. She pulled the dog completely up onto her lap and embraced the mongrel with both arms. She put her cheek down on the soft curly back, still watching the reflection. Mimi's whining became continuous and sounded more upset. The dog wiggled to reach Carol's face with her tongue, still unsuccessfully.

"Mimi, I don't know what to do. I've got to make him go away." She was breathing deeply and her ribs felt tight. She was frightened and cold. "I don't have a gun, not even a toy gun to scare him with, and even if I did have one I'd probably shoot myself in the foot with it. And he wouldn't even be scared of it. I don't think he would. He'd just take it away from me and shoot me instead. Oh, Jesus, Mimi, there must be something I can do."

A minute later, she heard footsteps in the hall. Frozen, she stared at the bedroom door. But the man went into the bathroom and closed the door. Through the wall she heard a trickle of water, then the toilet flushed. The sound released her. Dumping Mimi, who jumped to the floor, she pulled jeans off the dresser and put them on under her bathrobe. She took a thick navy blue sweater from the bottom dresser drawer, pulled loose the belt of her robe and

shrugged it onto the floor, then pulled the sweater over her head. The high turtleneck warmed her throat. From the closet she got rough leather hiking boots with thick black rubber soles and laced them tightly, without bothering to find socks.

She put one hand on the doorknob, the other on the bolt. Mimi stood with her nose at the crack, her tail held out stiffly. Carol held her breath and listened. She heard a television commercial for bleach. She moved her hands and a single click came from the bolt and doorknob together. She listened again at the handspan opening. The channel changed to an ad for men's underwear.

So he was still there.

She pulled the door wide and stepped into the hall. She took four steps and then stopped. Mimi stood at her heels. Carol was not cold any more. Moisture filmed her forehead and palms, and made her sockless boots feel clammy. Straight ahead was the living room. To the left was the kitchen. She stood breathing shallowly, listening. Geraldo Rivera said something about elementary school kids carrying pistols. The man must still be sitting on Carol's sofa. She could see the end of it in the doorway. He was only a few feet from her, barely hidden by the wall. She wasn't ready to face him yet. She turned.

In the kitchen she silently lifted her largest knife from the clutter on the stove top. The teakettle of cold water was still on the stove and she never had made tea, she realized. She held the knife in her left hand and squeezed the handle hard. The weathered wood felt cool and dry in her hand. The knife was heavy, with a long, rigid blade of black steel.

She moved to the broom closet and opened it carefully. It was impossible to be silent, and she was almost grateful for the noise of the television. She was very much aware of the sound of Mimi's nails clicking on the floor. She reached for the broom, but it wasn't there. She had a moment of panic, then saw the broom in the far corner, behind the dining room table. She looked down at Mimi and mouthed the word "sit," while jerking her extended index finger down. The "s" hissed only a little, but Mimi sat, ears alert. Carol took three steps, made a long sideways stretch across the table, and grabbed the broom. She lifted it above the table and stepped back into the kitchen. She listened closely. Could he have seen the moving broom from where he sat? Was he reacting? Was he coming for her?

She didn't hear anything but the television.

Setting the bristle end on the floor, she slid her hand down the

broom. Lifting, she found the balance point about eight inches above the bristles. She held the broom in her right hand and turned it so that her thumb rested on top of the handle and the bristles were tucked under her elbow.

She stood in the dining room, out of sight of the living room, and tried to set her mind on violence. *Could I deliberately cut somebody?* A closeup image of a deep slice in an arm filled her mind, blood running everywhere. She told herself that this was a satisfying thing to happen, not something to avoid. She tried to imagine stabbing him with the broom handle, a nasty bruise on the shoulder, the ribs, in the solar plexus. Yes, and a crack on the side of the head. And if he stood up, she could use the long pole to trip him, whack him in the shins. Okay, she could enjoy that. She expected that he would try to take the weapons away from her. Well, she would watch for that. She wouldn't let him. *Okay, ready? Yes, ready. Okay, go. Yes. Go. Now? Okay.* One more deep breath and hold onto the resolution, she told herself, hold onto the weapons. With Mimi behind her, she walked into the living room and faced the man on the sofa, keeping the coffee table between them.

He pointed the remote control at the TV and silence returned. Carol thought he looked annoyed with her for interrupting.

"Get up," she told him.

"Why should I?"

"*Get up*, I said." She swung the broom handle toward his head. He ducked and dropped his feet to the floor.

"I want you to go away!" Carol said. She swung the broom handle sideways again, this time hitting the man on his left arm.

"Ow! Hey, goddam, lady, watch out with that thing." Leaning to his right, he got to his feet. She waved with the knife to indicate that she wanted him to walk around the coffee table and toward the dining room. As he did so, she stepped back toward the wall to give him room. As he neared the dining room, he suddenly lunged and grabbed the broom. Startled, Carol took another step backward and felt the wall behind her. The man jerked on the broom and twisted it easily from her grasp.

Carol gave a small cry as Mimi started barking again from the middle of the living room.

Carol passed the knife to her right hand and swung it in a wide circle in front of her. The man was just out of her reach. She took a step forward. She was frightened of stabbing the man, and frightened of getting close enough to do it, but she knew she had no choice.

The man was holding the broom in both hands, and as Carol took her second step toward him, he swung it so that it hit her in the hip, knocking her off balance. He hit her again and again, sweeping her sideways into the dining room.

Carol was overwhelmed. She couldn't try again to stab the man, but in the dining room she could back away from him enough that he couldn't reach her with the broom. She pulled a chair out from under the table and tumbled it between them. She turned and threw open the back door and rushed out. Mimi ran under the dining room table and followed her.

It was cold outside, a fact she only noticed after she had crossed her own carport and entered that of the next door neighbors. The shrubbery along the property line screened her from the view of the man in her house. She couldn't hear him following her. Mimi was still with her. She stood listening and breathing white vapor while she tried to decide what to do next. So far she had not accomplished much. Maybe she should wait for the phone man to show up, but that could be as late as five o'clock. And it was cold. Maybe she could phone the police from a neighbor's house.

Carol tried to decide which neighbors to ask for help. She didn't know very many of them, even though she had lived there nearly four years. She had shared the house with one roommate during college, then another, and when she'd graduated and gone to work, she found she could afford to keep it alone. Between her shyness and her school, then her work, she had never joined in the daily neighborhood socializing she remembered her mother's engaging in. Now she wished she had.

She did know the couple who lived at the end of the block with their four-year-old daughter. The wife stayed home with the child, and maybe she would help. But Carol looked at their house and saw that the car was not in the driveway. That meant the wife was not home.

The empty carport she was standing in belonged to an older couple who both worked days. Their children were grown and gone. The couple didn't like Carol much. They were always complaining about the dog barking or about the trash cans sitting on the curb the day after the trash was collected or about Carol entertaining gentlemen callers without a chaperone. She thought they might have helped her with the intruder, since he was so much more clearly a rulebreaker in this instance than she was, but they wouldn't be home for hours.

The only other people on the block that she knew at all were the

woman across the street and her two children. That woman was a nurse named Ellen and she was divorced. Her boy was in high school and the girl in junior high. They, too, were all gone for the day, but Carol had watched their house for them when they went on vacation last summer. Ellen kept a plastic piece of fake granite in the flowerbed that held a hidden key in case the kids locked themselves out.

Carol and Mimi trotted across the deserted street. Carol looked back over her shoulder at her own small house, but in the bright sunshine she couldn't see into the dim living room. She didn't know if the man was watching her or not.

Carol scanned the edge of Ellen's flowerbed for the only rock that wasn't white chalky limestone. The black and white speckled fake granite was easy to spot. She turned it over and slid it open. There was the brass key. Carol began to feel some hope that she might be on the road to help. She closed the granite and set it on the step before opening the door with the cold key. She called Mimi to stop sniffing the yard and come in with her.

Carol had intended to walk directly to the phone and call 911, but forgot that plan when she saw a tiny old black woman sitting in Ellen's living room watching television.

"Oh, excuse me," Carol said. "I didn't mean to intrude. I'm . . . I'm a friend of Ellen's. She told me where she keeps the key. I hope I'm not bothering you. I just wanted to use the phone. Uh, is that all right?"

"Don't make me no never mind, dearie. You just can't make no long distance calls or they'll know, you know what I mean?" The woman was a little hard to understand, perhaps because the game show was turned up so loud, perhaps because many of her teeth were missing. "And you got to clean everything up real good, too. See, when they're clean housekeepers, they notice more if you been there. You got to wash everything and put it back just where you found it. That's when they's clean housekeepers, you know. They notice if something's out of place. I wish I had one of them messy housekeepers sometimes, 'cause then it's easier, but it's not so nice, you know? But them clean housekeepers, you know, you got to clean up before they come home."

Carol noticed that, indeed, the house was tidy, the rug vacuumed, tabletops cleared off except for lamps and short, neat stacks of magazines. She was very confused about who the old woman was. Ellen had not mentioned any relatives coming to visit, although she might not, of course, but then again, the woman did not look

like a relative. Ellen and her children were clearly Caucasian and the old woman was clearly not. An old family retainer? Carol realized she was grasping at straws. A horrible thought occurred to her. "I'll just go use the phone, then."

"You do that, dearie, but if you bring that dog in here, you got to vacuum, 'cause they'll see them dog hairs on the carpet, you know. And I be too old to go vacuuming up for you, you know. You bring in that dog, you got to vacuum."

"Oh, yes, of course. I will," Carol lied as she edged into the kitchen with Mimi. She picked up the phone and dialed the emergency number. She heard a busy signal. She was very surprised, but realized that all the lines could be tied up at once. She pushed the hang-up switch and dialed again. Still busy. She hung the phone up.

The old woman had stopped paying any attention to her and had gone back to watching her game show. Carol called 911 again. And again. And again. She hung up and waited some more. She tried again.

At last she went into the living room and sat down. Mimi curled up at her feet. "So, how long have you known Ellen?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"I said, how long have you known Ellen?"

"Oh, I been coming here a long time. How long you been coming here?"

"A couple of years." The mustard ad on TV was much louder than the show had been. Sandwiches were screaming and cringing.

Carol was not sure exactly what information she had just received or given.

"How long will you be staying, do you think?" Babies of all races modeled disposable diapers.

"Oh, I got to go by four today. The boy, he got basketball practice, but the girl, she be home on time."

"Oh." Carol paused, not sure what to say next. "Well, do you think you'll be back soon?"

"Oh yeah, I be back tomorrow eight o'clock. That's right. Tomorrow Friday, I be back."

"Ah. I think I'll try the phone again." She got up and dialed 911. Still busy. She dialed her own house. It rang twelve times before she hung up. She wondered if it had really rung, or if the lines were still messed up. She dialed the store where she worked. That was busy, too, but it was no surprise. They got a lot of telephone calls at the store. She dialed the time service. It was ten fifty-three

A.M. She tried 911 again. Busy. She tried work again. Busy. She dialed Mimi's vet. A recording told her she had dialed a number not in service and to please check the number and try again. Nine eleven was still busy.

They must have designed a busy signal to sound as infuriating as possible, Carol decided. Her teeth were on edge with frustration. She told herself to be patient and sat back down in the living room to wait for people to hang up. She watched another game show with the old woman.

A few shows later Carol felt as if she was waking from a trance. She wondered what time it was. A lawyer was telling her that she should hire him to sue somebody, anybody, if she had been in an accident. Mimi was asleep at her feet. The old woman was getting up and hobbling down the hall toward the bathroom.

Carol still had Ellen's door key in her hand. She stuffed it in the pocket of her jeans and tried the phone again. No matter where she called, she could not reach a live human being. She could only get recorded messages, unanswered rings, or busy signals.

When the old woman got back, Carol asked her about the phone. "That's right, sometimes when you on the time share, they don't let you tell nobody, you know. You're new at this, huh?"

"I don't even know what's going on. This strange man came into my house this morning and he wouldn't leave, and then he chased me out and I came here and now I don't know what to do."

"Well, now you know. That's what you get when you stay home and it ain't your turn. Now you got to take your turn, too, long wif the rest of us." The old woman ran water into an electric coffeepot, then opened a canister. "I'm Agnes. You want coffee?"

"No," said Carol. "No, thank you."

She went to the front door and looked across the street. There was something on her porch. She called Mimi and went out.

They found two things on the porch. The smaller was a yellow note on the front door handle saying that the phone company repairman had found no one at home and that she should call for another appointment. The larger was a pile of her clothes. There was a suitcase on top of the pile, and as Carol stuffed her clothes into it, she realized that the man had selected well for her. There were four pairs of heavy socks, some long-sleeved shirts, an extra pair of jeans, a knit cap and gloves, and her winter jacket. There was her toothbrush, deodorant, all her prescriptions. He even sent out the car keys, although the house keys were missing. And no I.D., either.

Carol tried the front door. It was locked, of course. She always left the front door locked. She went around to the carport and tried the kitchen door. It was locked, too. She knocked. Mimi wagged her tail and pressed her nose to the crack.

The man answered promptly. He had the security chain on.

"I need the dog brush," Carol said. "It's in the bathroom drawer. If I don't brush her every day, she gets mats."

The man didn't say anything, but closed the door. Mimi was caught off guard and nearly got her nose smashed. Carol shifted her weight from one foot to another while they waited. In a minute the man came back and handed the metal brush through the small opening the chain allowed. He waited silently.

Carol didn't know what he expected from her. "Thank you," she said, and turned away.

"You bet."

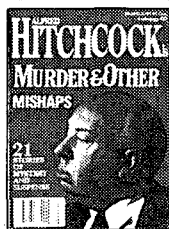
Carol took her bag back across to Ellen's house. She made sure the door was still unlocked, then she put the key back into the fake rock and carefully replaced it in the flowerbed. She went inside and put her bag on the kitchen floor. Mimi went exploring down the hall.

During the news, Carol and Agnes shared three scrambled eggs, an orange, and some toast. Carol had a small glass of milk and the old woman drank more coffee. Mimi had an egg and toast chopped up in a bowl with milk on it. She whined eagerly while it was being fixed, as if she knew it was a special treat. Agnes assured Carol that Ellen would never question the missing food, not with teenagers in the house.

Carol washed the dishes and the old woman dried, since she knew where to put everything away. Agnes took the orange peels and eggshells out of the empty wastebasket and warned Carol to be more careful. She washed them down the garbage disposal.

That afternoon they watched an old black and white movie in which Cary Grant married an American servicewoman in Europe and had to wear a wig made of horsehair to pass as a WAC nurse to get free navy transportation home. They didn't get to see the end because Carol had to vacuum before they left.

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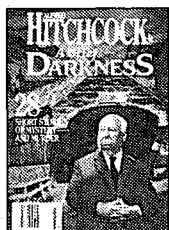
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Passing for Love

—by—
—Bill—
Crenshaw

“**R**ead it,” she snapped. Scott looked at the letter drooping in his hand. It started the way they all had started. “Dear Lovebirds,” he began.

Lucinda cut him off in a voice angry, weary. “How much? Another ten thousand each?”

Scott read on to himself a second before looking up slowly. He cleared his throat. “Fifty thousand. Midnight Friday.”

She went white. "They're crazy. Four days. I can't . . ." Her fist went to her mouth. "My God, Scott, what will I do?"

Scott laid the letter on the back of the couch and wiped his hands on his pants. "Marry me," he said.

She turned away and crossed the room to the window, her shoulders hunched, head bowed as she stared down at the traffic below, at the long fall between her and the street. The window leapt from floor to ceiling, and she stood framed, the sun splitting and dancing on auburn hair sweeping down past her shoulders, falling by her face like curtains.

"Lucie," he began, but her right hand came up. It hung in the air above her shoulder, then drifted back to her mouth. He waited. She stood motionless, glowing in the afternoon light, her shadow stretching behind her nearly to his feet. She would stand like that for a long time. He tensed and relaxed and tensed his calves. He tried to watch her shadow move with the sun. Finally she shuddered and sighed and pulled a thick cascade of hair behind her ear.

"Divorce him," said Scott, "Marry me."

She did not move.

"I know we've been through this before," he said. "But isn't it the answer?" He snatched up the letter and held it out to her

back. "Isn't it the only thing that will stop this?"

She said nothing.

He waited. She would stand a while longer, frozen, stone. Then her shoulders would start to quiver as she tried to squeeze the tears back in, and then he could cross the room and put his hands on those shoulders and turn her into him, and she would bury her face in his shirt and clutch at him and sob. "Oh, Scott," she'd sob, "I can't, I just can't." Then she'd take his face in her hands, slide her fingers into his hair, he'd feel the tapered nails along his scalp, then she would pull his lips to hers, crushing, insistent, always surprisingly urgent. "Love me, Scott," she'd say. "Just love me." Then they would go to the bedroom and make desperate love. It was the game they played. He waited.

She turned slowly, fist still at lips. She raised her face, backlit, her hair burning around her, looking young. "All right," she said evenly. "I'll marry you."

Scott felt his insides freeze solid. What had he done?

"You went too far," Connie snapped, pacing, hands slicing the air. Her voice was a blade. "You pushed her too hard."

"We pushed her too hard," Scott said. Even to himself, it

sounded like a whine. "You're the one who said go for fifty."

Connie stopped pacing and squared off, finger pointing like a pistol at his heart. "You're the one *there*. You're the one who's supposed to be in control. That was the whole point."

"The point," said Scott, bristling, "was to make sure she didn't call the police and that she did pay up and that we knew what she was going to do."

"Well, it worked. We know what she's going to do. She's going to marry us."

He felt blood rushing to his face. He hated that, and he hated the way she could get to him. "What was I supposed to say? 'You'll raise the cash somehow? Don't worry, darling, we'll see this through together?'"

Connie gave exaggerated, sarcastic nods, eyes wide. "Better. That's better than your little macho 'Marry me.' But you just love it. You love working her up and melting her down, love making love to a woman the age of your mother."

Scott stood up. "My mother—"

"Oh, shut up, Scott." She turned away, pacing again. "You had something to prove. It's months down the drain."

Sometimes he just wanted to hit her. Easy for her to criticize, she wasn't the one out front. But when they argued, and she

had all the right words and all the right answers and there was nothing he could say, all he wanted to do was to hit her and make her listen to him for once, make her just shut up. He clenched his fists and slowed his breathing as she stormed back and forth in her sky-blue teddy, bitching, thigh muscles tightening as she moved about with casual, unthinking grace, strength taut beneath the dewy skin, but maybe right, goddammit, maybe she was right, because he *did* like it when Lucinda rose hot at his command, when his touch traced fire across her skin, when he molded her under his fingertips.

Maybe he'd really screwed things up. Lucinda wasn't like the others. The others were bored and rich and horny and didn't mind being scammed for a few thousand, thought the sex was worth it. But this one, this one was the right combination of money, desire, and fear, had gotten hooked, addicted to the attention, the sex, to the love, finally, or what passed for love, what she thought was love. And then Connie had gotten the idea for blackmail.

Scott had shaken his head. He wanted to stick with scams. With a scam, you had a mark too embarrassed or ashamed or afraid to bring in the cops when they got burned, and with a

scam you could always walk away if it wasn't working out, and who'd ever know. But blackmail drew cops like flies and could go wrong in too many places. "Too dangerous," he'd said.

"Not if you're blackmailing yourself," Connie had answered. "Not if you're *both* victims. You'll both be threatened. You'll follow the instructions to the letter. You'll raise the cash and make the payoff and console each other all night."

"No," Scott had said, but he had given in as he always did, because Connie was clever and Connie, well, Connie . . .

So a letter arrived at Lucinda's condo, addressed to Lucinda, but demanding ten thousand dollars each from both her and her loverboy. *Dear Lovebirds*, it began. *Enclosed please find several photographs . . .*

And Lucinda had paid, had hocked jewels she hadn't worn in years or sold what little stock she claimed she had listed in her name alone. And Scott and Connie had paid too, scraping up almost six thousand on their own, borrowing the rest from a shark named Bennie who knew them and gave them a deal, ten percent per week, one week minimum. And Scott had sat at Lucinda's kitchen table and wrapped his ten grand and Lucinda's ten grand in newspaper

exactly as instructed and bagged it exactly as instructed and made the drop exactly as instructed, and he and Connie had cleared nearly nine thousand after expenses, including Bennie, and not including all Scott's clothes and cigarette lighters and gold neck chains and such, presents from Lucinda, with love.

And they'd done it again, and again, three letters so far, and each one had worked fine, just as Connie planned.

But now . . .

Maybe Connie was right. Maybe he'd been stupid. Maybe he had gotten carried away with Lucinda, this woman whose face was in the newspaper with other wives of the important, who attended all the right functions with all the powerful people on the arm of her most right and powerful husband—this woman went limp over him, over *him*, for Christ's sake. When she drove herself at him, when she needed him so clearly, like a junkie needed a fix, his limbs felt hot and light with power. Good for the ego. Bad for business.

And now business was blown. So as Connie said, now what?

"We pull out," he offered. "We take what we've got and head for Miami."

Connie slowed her pacing, stopped, hand on hip, hand rubbing forehead.

"What else can we do?" he persisted. "We got, what, twenty-five, thirty grand? Let's get out of here."

"Maybe we can salvage this." She wasn't talking to him. She wasn't even thinking about him.

"We've got enough," he said, which was not what he wanted to say. He didn't know what he wanted to say exactly. He could say anything to Lucinda, he made beautiful speeches to Lucinda, but this was Connie, and he couldn't string together things he didn't mean and couldn't say what he did mean, and even when he wanted to hit Connie, it was so that she'd respect him more, or love him more, or something. Things would be different, maybe, if they got married. He wasn't sure exactly, but he thought that in Miami maybe he'd even ask her to marry him. She'd like that, he thought. They could go to Miami now, drop Lucinda and fly. "Bird in the hand, Connie. Let's take what we've got."

She was silent. She was mad. He'd really messed up this time, really made her mad. He hated it when she got mad at him.

He sank back onto the couch. "I'm sorry, Con," he said. She stared at him and finally she smiled, and she crossed to him and sat in his lap.

"Not your fault," she said, stroking his hair. "One of those things."

"Yeah, well," he said, "what now?"

Connie was silent again, staring off into middle distances.

She was beautiful, the smell, the warmth of her was beautiful. Scott felt himself shifting, making the transition from Lucinda to Connie. He was in a room with Connie now, his Connie, and with her he didn't care about Lucinda or any more of Lucinda's money or Lucinda's driving, electric sexuality. He was with Connie.

"Connie?"

She sat up, gave him a small pat as she refocused her attention. "How does she feel about it all?"

Scott shrugged. "She keeps saying she's happy, like a weight's gone, she says. Her fingers keep trembling."

"Has she told her husband?"

"Not when I left."

Connie shook her head. "Didn't think she had the guts to tell him. Maybe she still doesn't. Okay," she said softly, "okay. She's excited. The blushing bride. She's nervous. We can keep her nervous. Keep her from telling her husband."

"She was excited. She's probably already told him."

"I don't think so."

"You haven't seen her."

Connie chewed her lower lip. "So we go ahead on the big score. We call her bluff."

"What if she's told him?" he said.

"Then we've got no hold." She tousled his hair. He could see that she didn't think for one second that Lucinda would tell her husband.

He raised his face to her. She smiled again, and kissed him.

Connie decided to let Lucinda go it alone for a couple of days. "It's one thing," she said, sitting in bed, sheet-covered, knees to chin, arms crossed around legs in the faded light of the full moon, "it's one thing to say yes in the heat of the night. Let's give her a couple of cold mornings."

"But if she's told . . ."

Connie gave him a patient smile. "And you have to make sure," she said, "that you don't encourage her to tell him. Not yet. You need to go iffy on the marriage. Give her a reason to back out gracefully herself."

"What should I say?"

Connie shrugged and smiled, a gesture consciously showing faith—her way, he supposed, of apologizing. "You'll know what to say," she said.

Standing in front of the mirror on Friday afternoon, he wasn't sure. He hadn't seen Lucinda since she'd said yes on Monday, and on the phone today she'd been in one of her moods, panting and insistent,

nervous and hungry. She didn't care what he had to tell his wife. He had to come tonight. He'd been away too long, and just when she really needed him. And anyway, she had a surprise. Lucinda's voice was strange to him after four days with Connie. He remembered her breasts in his hands.

He leaned toward the mirror and inspected minutely the lines at the corners of his eyes, the faint blue shadow of freshly shaved cheeks and chin. He leaned back for a broader view, then unknotted the tie Lucinda had given him and tried again. Lucinda liked him neat, precise, elegant. Decorative, Connie had said. An adornment. Something she wears on her arm.

The idea buzzed around him like a swarm of gnats. It was more than that. How could Connie know what he meant to Lucinda? She hadn't seen them together. Which was good, he thought suddenly, which was good, because if she had seen them together, then, well, then what hope would he have with Connie?

Maybe a lot, he thought. Maybe if she *could* see them together, could see Lucinda latch onto him like a vampire, gather him to her as if he held life itself, maybe Connie would have to look at him with new respect, jealous, seeing what she had in

front of her for the first time. Maybe Connie needed some competition.

No. Whatever she needed, it wasn't competition. He didn't know what she needed.

He checked the tie and unknotted it again.

He found himself hoping that Lucinda *had* already told her husband, no matter how afraid of him she was. And the mood she was in, she might have, please God, might have decided to make a clean breast of it, she'd say, get it out in the open where it belonged. Her little surprise. It'd be just like her to spring it over one of her sweet dessert wines or a was-it-good-for-you-too cigarette. "Isn't that wonderful, Scott darling," she'd say. "We're free, now. Really free."

But what would he say to her then? That he hadn't been able to tell his wife yet? He had tried, he'd say, but it wasn't easy like he thought it would be? It wasn't like he hated her?

Yes, that was good. He practiced it in front of the mirror. "It's not like I hate her," he said to his reflection. "It's that I love you more, in ways I didn't know I could love. But it's so hard to tell them, isn't it? They'll think they've failed, but they haven't." Yes, that was very good. Then he could leave, he could say that he was going home to tell his wife right then, that min-

ute, and then he could kiss Lucinda goodbye, and then he and Connie would just keep going. He'd have been right, and Connie would have been wrong, and she'd say, "Now what," and he'd say Miami. Maybe Connie needed to be wrong.

He made a final adjustment to the tie and stared into his reflected face.

Unless Connie decided something else. Unless she decided that planning a marriage would be an even better scam, that as the future Mr. Lucinda he wouldn't need to blackmail, he could just reach out and take, and they could keep taking right to the altar. He could milk her up to the wedding and then just not show.

Then Miami.

Maybe.

Because Connie might even decide that marriage itself was the best scam of all. Everything Lucinda had would be his, and he could share it all with Connie, and everything could chug along pretty much like it was now, except without the danger that always hovered around any scam. Married, there'd be no scam.

Scott was suddenly tired.

Connie was right after all. Lucinda hadn't told her husband. Instead, Lucinda's surprise was a deadline party, a celebration

of freedom and burned bridges, a ritual to mark, she said, her new courage.

"You've got to tell him," Scott heard himself saying, surprised that he was saying it. What would Connie say if she could hear him say that? But Lucinda was all around him and Connie seemed so distant at the moment. His head swam.

"I will," said Lucinda. "After tonight, I'll have courage." She put her hand on his chest. "My new heart," she said. "Courage means heart in French, having heart. You give me heart. You are my heart." She kissed him gently then, tenderly, without passion but with great feeling. It startled him, frightened him. He pulled away. Her grip tightened. "Don't, Scott," she said.

"You've got to tell him," he said, his voice again sounding far away, as if from someone else. "I've told her. You've got to tell him."

He felt her fingernails digging into his arms.

"Help me tonight, just tonight. Help me past the deadline. I'm not good at defiance, Scott. I need you."

She was trembling. He folded her to him, her head on his chest, and he stared beyond her into the lights of the night and the city and smiled. It wasn't a party to celebrate the deadline, he realized; it was to get her past it. She was afraid of the

blackmailer out there in the dark even while she held him in her arms.

He stroked her hair. "I'm here," he said. "We'll see this through together. They can't hurt us now."

She turned her face toward him and managed a smile. "At midnight," she said, "we'll be making love, and fuck them." From her the word sounded ugly. And she started unbuttoning his shirt.

But as midnight neared she lay brittle and knotted. She asked Scott for a cigarette. He lit two, like in the movies, and passed one to her. She held it between her fingers and ignored it.

Scott's watch gave two tiny beeps. The clock in the next room chimed twelve times. Her body stiffened.

He rolled onto his elbow, stroked her hair. "Will you relax?"

She twisted away and sat up, pulling the sheet to her neck and her knees to her chest. She jammed the cigarette to her lips and took a hard drag, illuminating nostrils and cheekbones in the brief orange flare. The long ash curled and fell on the sheet. "What will they do?"

"Nothing," he said. She looked at him as if he were crazy. "Nothing. We're not going to play any more. Game's over."

"Don't patronize me," she

snapped. The cigarette shook, leaking zigzag columns of smoke. "What will they do?"

"What *can* they do?"

She stared blankly at the foot of the bed. "Will they hurt us?" The question sounded wrenched out of her, as if the act of naming were an act of invoking.

"That's the last thing they want," Scott said.

She was silent, staring beyond the room now, face locked in fear. Scott felt the deep electric jolt of power. She was still afraid. Better. She was scared to death.

"Look," he said, soothing, calming. "Why should they hurt us? Blackmail only works if everybody plays. If we quit paying, they'll go somewhere else. They won't take chances. They won't hurt us."

She said nothing. She was a statue again, like at the window, as she was when she went deep somewhere to hide or to think. She sat, eyes fixed. Scott wanted to pinch her, slap her, just to see if he could get a reaction, or to reach for her and watch his touch transform the marble into warm and eager flesh again. The cigarette slipped from her fingers and rolled down the sheet and under the spread at her feet.

"Jesus," Scott shouted, flinging back the spread and smacking at the cigarette with his bare hand. "Jesus, Lucinda,

what the hell?" The orange coal exploded under his pounding and the sparks blasted away, fiery gnats that landed all over the sheets. "Jesus," he said over and over again, beating at the tiny orange sparks eating holes in the fabric. He smelled satin burning.

"I can't believe she told him," Connie said. She sat on the couch. Scott stood holding out a can of beer to her. He waited. Connie looked up finally, realized he'd been standing there. "Sorry," she said. "Thanks."

Scott crossed the room and stood as if in thought. It was working better than he had hoped, better than he imagined, not that he had really planned this out, he admitted, he couldn't claim that. It was just that he'd been tired when he stumbled back to the apartment after a long night with Lucinda, and Connie had been so cocky, so sure of herself, her scenarios all laid out. He hadn't planned to lie, but it sure changed the weather when he said that Lucinda had told her husband and that her husband hadn't objected to a quiet divorce. Connie, for the first time, was at a loss.

"I just can't believe it," she said again. "She'd *never* tell him."

Scott shrugged. "I tried to tell

you she was serious. I mean, we hooked her good, Con. She's in love deep."

"I mean, this wasn't just I-don't-want-a-scandal. She was afraid to tell him, *scared* to tell him." She took a swallow of beer. She shook her head. "Now what?"

He smiled.

But she didn't give him a chance to answer, making plans already. "Miami, I guess," she said. "Sure wish I'd known this yesterday. Could've saved us another month's rent on this dump. I guess we need to . . ."

"Let's don't quit just yet," said Scott.

Connie gave him her tolerant smile. "Hon, it's over. She's not going to pay another dime."

"Well, just let me . . ."

"Thought you wanted to go to Miami."

"Just let me try something out here, all right? Is that okay?"

"There's nothing to try."

"There's more to be had."

"Anything you get now'll be chump change. 'Here, darlin', go buy yourself a suit, a new car, another . . ."

She mimicked what she thought was Lucinda. It made Scott mad.

"Is a hundred grand chump change?" he snapped. That shut her up. "I think we still have a shot at a big score here, if you'll just give it a chance."

She pulled at her beer again,

watching him over the top of the can.

"Okay," she said. "I'm listening."

Scott stood at Lucinda's window, the traffic stories beneath him. He imagined holding a brick over the street. How much damage would it do, he wondered, just from opening his fingers.

Far below a cab pulled to the curb. He wasn't surprised that he recognized Lucinda getting out, even from this height. All part of feeling in control.

He turned back to the room, waiting. She'd be glad to see him, of course. It had been two days, so she'd be more than glad. She'd be hungry. And for the last two days, Connie had been . . . well, more like Lucinda, more like she needed him, too. But still his Connie.

If he had a choice, he wondered, who would he pick? Just as Lucinda's key hit the lock, he realized he did have a choice. Both were his for the plucking. He had only to reach out and take.

He didn't need to paste on the smile for Lucinda. It was already there.

Lucinda swept into the room, kissed him violently, the plastic bag on her arm banging his ribs as she spun away and swirled toward the kitchen. "I've got a surpri-ise," she sang.

"What?" he called.

"You just sit down," she called back. "I'll be out in a jif."

He heard the cork pop. Champagne. That's what had hit his ribs. Launching their freedom, maybe. "Champagne," he called.

"Oh, you," she said in mock exasperation. "And caviar. And news."

"What news?" he called, but she was there handing him the long-stemmed glass.

She clinked hers to his. "To us," she said, raising her glass.

"To us," he echoed, and drank.

"What news?"

She turned and snuggled her back into his chest and wrapped his arms around her waist. "I can keep you."

He laughed and leaned to her ear. She tucked her head and laughed and lifted her face and kissed him. "I talked to my husband," she said, "and he didn't kill me. He said I could not have a divorce, but that I could keep you."

Late that night, sitting in bed next to Lucinda's sleeping shape, drinking bourbon neat and lighting one cigarette from another, Scott tried to think of the word floating just out of reach in his mind.

What the hell did it mean, I can keep you. Kept man . . . access to bank accounts maybe . . . living in style . . . but it also meant a

stud farm role, it meant losing Connie, or worse, it meant that Connie would see the chance to extend the scam so that he drained Lucinda slowly. He'd be kept by both.

He watched the smoke rise in a solid column and disintegrate into chaos and cloud.

Or, he thought, Lucinda was lying. Which was worse. Or better. Better because she was afraid to tell her husband after all. Worse because now she was running a scam, and he couldn't exactly call the old hubby up and ask if she'd told him about her hot affair.

He stared at the curve of her hip, remembering her lips fastening on him, and the word floated into view, as if forming out of the smoke. Succubus.

He decided on Connie. Things were better there, now, and they could run the last scam on Lucinda and collect the hundred grand and go go go. If he stayed with Lucinda, she'd smother him.

"I can't believe you mean this," said Connie.

"If it's going to work," said Scott, "she's got to believe the threat is real."

"We can slash her tires or something."

"Fine, that too."

She picked at her blouse. "I just don't want you hurt."

He smiled and shrugged. "I haven't been in a good barroom brawl since the army. Kind of looking forward to it, to tell you the truth. You go on. Give me fifteen minutes."

Connie kissed him, hand resting lightly on his chest, then walked down the street and turned into the bar. Scott walked in the opposite direction. Connie was worried. Worried and protective. Worried and deferential. Connie with the parts of Lucinda he liked best.

He smiled. He walked three blocks up, then turned and walked back.

He didn't look around until he had ordered a beer, and then he did most of his looking in the mirror behind the bartender.

It wasn't hard to pick a fight in a bar. The trick was to pick the right kind of fight. What he needed was a pair of buddies who'd had a little too much, just enough to make them cocky and to slow their reactions, just enough to make them sensitive to insults and eager to gang up on one guy.

There was a likely pair at a table just off the far end of the bar, telling jokes, putting their heads together, laughing a little too long and a little too loud. A pair of happy jacks.

In the mirror Scott caught Connie's eye and inclined his head a fraction towards the end

of the bar. Connie followed his gaze, saw the pair, nodded. Scott drained his beer and ordered a new bottle. He stood and made his way toward them. He could look at their beefy faces and tell which whispered insult would start them swinging. He could even make it look as if they jumped him without provocation.

Connie was there to limit damage. When the fight started, she'd yell "Police!" to break it up. That way Scott could duck out the back and wouldn't get beaten up too bad.

He needed to get beaten up some, though. It had to be real enough to scare Lucinda, to build on the terror he had seen at the deadline party. Getting beaten up in the bar would be proof that she had been right, and the letter that Connie would mail would say, "Dear Lovebirds: What happened last night is just the beginning. The price just doubled. You're going to pay one way or another. Cash or flesh. Take your choice." Then he'd see how Lucinda reacted. And Connie. He'd see the effect on Connie, too.

He leaned toward the happy jacks and smiled. This was going to be fun.

“We could have them arrested,”
Lucinda said.
Scott shook

his head, winced from real pain. "Wouldn't do any good," he said. "They'd claim I started it. They'd pay a fine. Then they'd kill me. Or worse, they'd hurt you. They want their money. They think we owe them." His words came thick through his bruised lips. The right side of his face was swollen and purple. His right eye was shut. A split above his left eye was closed with eight tiny black x's. He looked terrible. He looked a lot worse than he felt, but he didn't feel good.

"I'm going to pay," said Scott. "What else can I do?"

They were sitting at the kitchen table. Very domestic, he thought, except that across from him Lucinda sat silent and staring, tears filling her eyes and running down her cheeks and splashing onto the white ceramic tile of the table. She had started when she saw his face. She had continued through the story of the fight. She wasn't sobbing; wasn't breathing hard or funny; her voice, when she spoke, was almost normal. It was as if she didn't know she was crying. It was more like overflowing than crying. The tears just poured out. They were making Scott nervous.

"It will never stop," she said.

"I think they're skipping town. I think that's why they asked for so much. I think this will be the last time."

She smiled at him as if at a child who had said something almost clever. She reached out and touched his cheek. "They hurt you. Poor face. Poor face."

Scott pulled away as if her touch hurt. "I can have the money in a couple of days. But that's going to wipe me out."

She just stared, tears leaking from her unblinking eyes.

"Couple of days enough for you, Lucinda?" he asked.

"I'll have to make some phone calls," she said, as if talking to a third person.

Scott nodded and put his head down and hoped there was a way he could get out of there early that night.

Connie laid the money out in neat little stacks on the coffee table. A hundred thousand dollars. Twenty thousand of it theirs. Eighty thousand Benjie's, at the same terms. Borrow eighty, pay back eighty-eight. Scott thought it was high, since they'd been such good customers lately. Connie said that it took money to make money. "You're paying eight to get a hundred," she'd said. "You clear ninety-two." Looked at that way, it was a good deal.

Scott had a package of brown lunch bags with Mickey Mouse waving in sunglasses and flowery shirt. Miami.

Connie's hands danced over

the stacks, counting. There were a lot of stacks.

"Okay," she said. "All here. Now remember, ten thousand a bag, ten bags in the grocery sack, grocery sack in the green leaf bag. Lucinda's ten bags in another grocery sack, that sack in the same leaf bag. Be sure you bag hers like you're really worried about following orders. Where's the drop?"

Scott squinted into the distance and ran through the directions to the green dumpster out in the pastureland.

Connie was smiling, shaking her head. "Poor face," she said. "No more of this. We've got to change the kind of operation we run. You've got to take better care of that poor face. I want it handsomed up again in Miami."

He tried to smile. It hurt a little.

"Well," she said. "That's it. Don't forget, Gate 7 at ten forty-three, Flight 398. Don't push her too far this time."

Scott smiled again. "Don't worry."

Connie touched his cheek. "Love you," she said. She'd never said that before.

Lucinda was late. If she didn't hurry, they wouldn't make the drop. Maybe she was having trouble getting the cash.

Scott stared down at the long fall from the condo window,

hoping that she hadn't done something stupid. God, she was so moody, she could do anything. The last thing he needed was to get linked up to a suicide.

It was scary, standing at the edge of the big payoff for all that work, for performing for Lucinda, for sometimes losing himself in the performance, for sneaking around to meet Connie. Final performance coming up. It would be worth it if it worked.

He sat down at the kitchen table and counted out ten Mickey Mouse lunch bags and waited. *Traffic*, he thought, *or trouble getting the cash. She'll be frantic. Be calm.*

And then Lucinda came breezing in, not frantic, but happy, smiling. She gave him a hug. If she was carrying the money, he didn't see it. She laughed.

"Oh, darling," she said. "Oh, darling."

Scott didn't even try to smile. "We've got to hurry if we want to make the drop. We..."

"I have a surprise," she said, fumbling through a drawer, pulling out a corkscrew. It was disorienting, like the other day being replayed. "Sit down."

"Lucinda," he began.

"Just sit down." There was an edge there that he couldn't ignore, an edge like Connie's voice could get.

She opened a bottle of wine, humming. She poured two glasses. She gave him one. "To us," she said. Scott raised his glass and sipped. She drained hers.

From her shoulder bag she removed a blank white envelope. "Surprise," she said, handing it to Scott. "Happy birthday, Merry Christmas, and many happy returns."

There were two pictures inside, pictures of two men. The happy jacks from the bar. They were quite obviously dead.

"Hurting you was where they made their mistake, of course," Lucinda went on, refilling the glasses, spilling the red wine across the tablecloth, across Scott's sleeve. "It wasn't hard to find them after that."

Scott looked from the pictures to Lucinda. "You . . . ?"

She laughed. "Not me, silly. Friends. Well, people my husband knows. We can't keep these pictures, so look while you can." She looked at the pictures. She looked at him. "Well? Isn't this wonderful?"

Oh God, Scott thought frantically. *Oh God*. He tried to say something, found himself stammering, got control by twisting his shock to fit her expectations. He was stunned, he said. It was incredible. It was great. He never expected it. She beamed.

He had to get out of there.

She had served up the bodies on the kitchen table like a favorite dessert. *Calm, calm*, he told himself. *You've got the money. Get it, get out, get out of town.*

The doorbell rang. He jumped up, knocking over his glass. She laughed again, put her hands on his shoulders, sat him down. She took the pictures with her. He could hear her talking to someone, male, deep-voiced, but he couldn't make out the words, wasn't sure he'd understand them if he could. Wine ran to the edge of the table, hung there, building, building, then broke and ran, dripping into his lap. She came back into the kitchen and picked up the green leaf bag. Scott leaned forward, reaching, trying to say something, but she cut him off.

"It bought our freedom," she said. "And it cost us only half of what they wanted." And she was gone, with the money. His money and Connie's. And Bennie's.

He was numb.

But he could still leave.

Connie already had the tickets. That, and the money in her purse, was all they had. They'd had less. It would be hard in Miami, at first, anyway. But when his face healed they could work another scam. Or they could get into something safe, like drug running.

He heard Lucinda say thank

you and goodbye, heard the door close. He took a deep breath and tried to gain some kind of control, to appear normal, whatever that was, so that he could leave, so that he could meet Connie, so that he could get the hell out.

Lucinda sat across from him, smiling. "It's almost over, darling." She shuddered. "They're a little scary," she said. "They said they'd call us later."

"Call us later?" he said.

"About the girl. They're going to take care of her, too. Then we really will be free, darling, once she's gone."

Scott was thinking about Bennie's money, about Bennie. He and Connie were through in this town. With Bennie, they might even have to watch their backs in Miami. He realized that Lucinda was talking to him. What was she saying? "Once who's gone?" he said. "Take care of who?" But part of him already knew.

She reached across the table and took his hand. "There was a girl," she said. "At the bar. A lookout. One of the blackmailers. She warned them that the police were coming."

Scott stood up, his ears roaring, room tilting. Lucinda took a sip of wine. Scott turned to-

ward where he thought the door was.

"Maybe you saw her?" Lucinda said.

"Saw her?" he repeated.

"The girl. The one who warned them. Maybe you saw her. They say she was already there when you came in. Sitting at a table just inside the door. Blonde? Pretty? Young?"

He shook his head slowly. He wanted to leave, just to find the door and go through it. But Bennie was out there. He turned and looked at Lucinda. "You didn't tell your husband."

She stared at him. "If I told him, he'd make me watch you die before he killed me."

Scott didn't know whether to believe her or not. His legs felt wet. He looked down. There was wine all over his pants. He didn't know what to do.

She wiped up the spilled wine at his place, righted his glass, filled it. "Sit down, darling," she said.

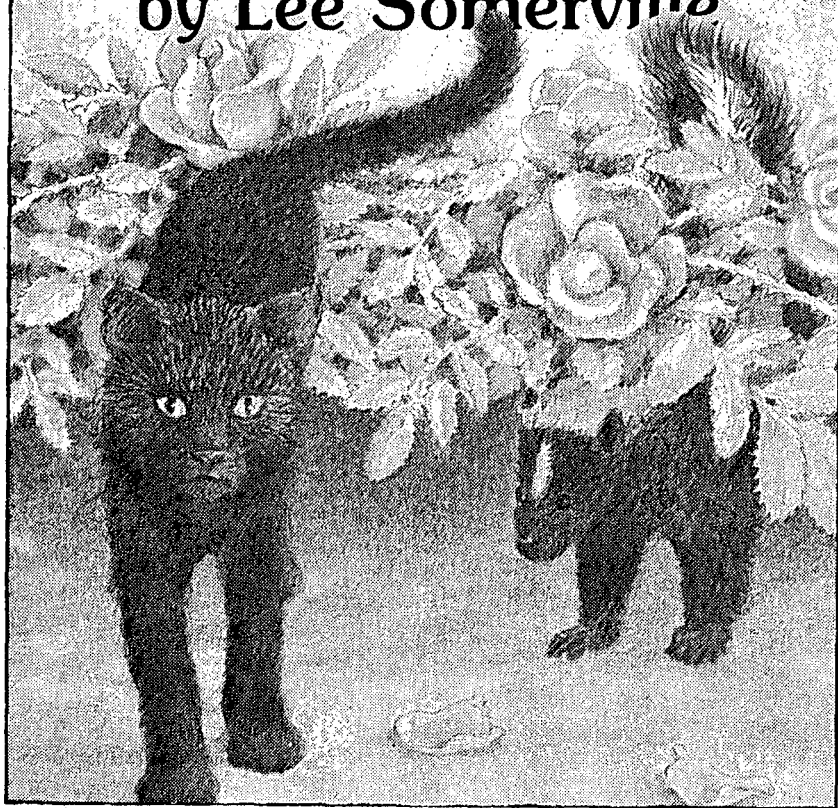
He sat. He stared down at his empty hands.

"I hope," she said, a smile flicking across her face, "I hope that I always love you as much as I do right now." She reached out and stroked his cheek.

It took all of his willpower not to flinch away.

The Black Cat

by Lee Somerville



She was an old cat, coal-black, lean and ugly. Her right ear had been chewed and her old hide showed scars, but she had a regal look when she sat under the rosebushes in the plaza and surveyed us with yellow-green eyes.

If the witch cat had a name, we never knew it. Miss Tessie fed it, as she fed other strays. She even let the old cat sleep in her store

in rainy weather. But mostly the cat slept under the rosebushes in our plaza in Caton City, Texas. We have a pretty little plaza, or square, here in the center of town. It has a fountain and a statue of a tired Confederate soldier facing north, ready to defend us from Northern invaders, and a bit of grass and lots of rosebushes.

Nobody dared to pet the old cat. People gave the cat scraps of bread and meat from hamburgers and hot dogs. She accepted this placidly, as a queen accepts homage from peons. Now and then a stray dog came through our small dusty town, saw the cat, and made a lunge at it. The cat would retreat to the base of the fountain, turn, lash with a razor-sharp claw that sliced the poor dog's nose. The dog would run howling while townspeople laughed. Our dogs, having learned the hard way, left that cat alone.

When I was fourteen, my mother's jailbird distant relative, Cousin Rush, came to live with us. My little brother Pete and I had to give up our room to this scruffy relative, but that wasn't the only reason I disliked him. I despised his dumpy figure and his smelly cigars and his scaly bald head and his way of looking at me with beady small eyes and nodding and winking.

Mama told me to show Cousin Rush the town, and I had to do it. This was the day before Halloween, and half the town was in the theater across the street from the plaza, rehearsing for the Heritage Festival we have every Halloween night. Miss Tessie was at the front of the theater, selling plastic masks of Cajun Caton and Davy Crockett. We have this play about Cajun Caton and a Delaware Indian, Chief Cut Hand, saving the town from Comanches on a Halloween night in the early 1800's. It ends with Cajun Caton, town hero, leaving his eight children and one wife later on and going off with Davy Crockett and getting killed in the Alamo during the Texas Revolution against Mexico in 1836.

Cousin Rush bought a mask from Miss Tessie. He smiled and flirted and talked of the Importance of History. His face smiled, but his eyes remained cold and scornful, and I could tell he thought this heritage business was hillbilly country foolishness. He'd already told me Caton City was a hick town filled with stupid people. It didn't compare with real towns.

As we started walking across the plaza, the black cat jumped from the rosebushes and ran in front of us.

To keep walking in a straight direction would have meant bad luck. I sidestepped, made a little circle, and prevented bad luck. I'm not superstitious, not really, but no use taking chances.

Cousin Rush laughed at me. Then, to show his scorn of superstition and black cats, he did a fat-legged little hop and skip and kicked that cat in the stomach.

The old cat doubled up on Cousin Rush's sharp-toed shoe. She clawed at his sock, then bounced into a rosebush. She landed on her feet, stood there, weaving, hurt. Cousin Rush kicked again, and she dodged. She ran into the street, stopped, looked at Cousin Rush with yellow-green eyes. As he popped his hands together, making a threatening noise, she stood her ground for a moment, then ran into Miss Tessie's store.

"You didn't have to do that," I said.

Cousin Rush stood there, the October sun beating down on his bald head and his cigar sticking out of his fat face. "You country bumpkins don't have to act ignorant, but you do. The only way to deal with a black cat running across your path is to kick the manure out of the cat. It's a callous world, Brian, and the only way to deal with it is to skin your buddy before he skins you."

"We don't act that way here," I disagreed.

"You are fools," he stated. He blew cigar smoke and looked at people milling around in front of the theater, talking and being friendly. "Now, tell me about this Heritage Festival you'll have tomorrow night. As I understand it, half the town is in the play, including the sheriff and his deputy. The other half—and that includes a lot of people that make this a sort of homecoming—will buy tickets and make cash contributions to the historical society. I understand this crazy old maid, this Miss Tessie, has collected a neat bit of cash."

"She's raising money for a historical marker to honor her ancestor, Cajun Caton."

"Yes. That's the idiot the town is named for."

"He was not an idiot. Caton and Davy Crockett were both killed in the Alamo, and they were Texas heroes."

Cousin Rush blew more smoke. "And there are at least a hundred people in this town descended from Caton. I understand that during the finale of this play, which Miss Tessie wrote, it has become a custom for every man in the audience to put on a mask to honor Cajun Caton or Davy Crockett? Hmmm."

I didn't like the sudden suspicion I had. I'd heard Mama and Dad talking in whispers, telling that Rush had served time in a Texas penitentiary for small-time robbery. I didn't like the cold, greedy look on my cousin's face.

I could have reported my suspicion to Sheriff Mitchell or to Deputy Haskins except for one thing—my mother was an Adams. Every Adams is intensely loyal to other Adamses, and don't you forget it. Cousin Rush was Rushid E. Sarosy, and his daddy had been a shoe salesman in Dallas, but his mama was Verney Adams to start with. Verney was a hot little blonde who was born with a female urge and grew up around it. She left Caton County fifty-six years ago for the big city, but she was still an Adams.

I had a suspicion, from the calculating look on his face, that Cousin Rush would burglarize some place tomorrow night when everybody was in the theater, or he'd rob the box office at the theater, wearing a mask like everybody else would wear.

I couldn't talk to Mama about my suspicions. If I was wrong and Cousin Rush didn't do anything bad, she'd say I was disloyal to the name of Adams.

As we left the plaza, the old black cat that Cousin Rush had kicked came out of Miss Tessie's store and looked at us as if she were casting a spell. I shivered.

I still wonder if what happened that night was just coincidence.

My little brother Pete had been unsuccessfully baiting that animal trap for a week. The trap was in the back yard. Here in Caton City, which is in northeast Texas, just south of Oklahoma and not far from Arkansas between the Red River and the Sulphur River, things were different. Coyotes and raccoons and possums and other animals came into town at night to raid garbage cans. Pete had been baiting that animal trap, actually a cage, for a week with cornbread, beans, cabbage, and such, hoping to catch a raccoon and make a pet of it. On this night, with a big moon beaming down, he had jerry-rigged a Rube Goldberg device that would turn on a light if the trap door was triggered.

Cousin Rush had our room now, so we slept in beds on our big screened-in back porch. About midnight the signal light came on to show the trap door had slammed down. Pete got out of bed in his underwear and ran barefoot to the trap, waving a flashlight.

He came back in a hurry. "Brian, we got trouble!"

I sat up, sniffed. "I smell it." The smell of skunk was not all that strong, showing the animal was fairly content, but it was definitely skunk.

"You got to shoot it."

"Hell, no! If you shoot that skunk, it'll make a smell that will

wake up the town," I cautioned. "It has plenty of food and water and room to move around in that cage-trap. After it eats, it will probably go to sleep, won't it?"

Pete thought this over. "I guess so, unless it's disturbed."

"Okay. I'll make sure the yard gates are closed, so no dogs or other animals can disturb that skunk. We'll figure what to do after it gets daylight tomorrow. Let sleeping skunks sleep, that's my motto."

After Pete had gone back to bed, I lay awake, thinking. I could take a long fishing pole, hold the cage as far from me as possible, and move gently. I'd have to get that skunk out of our back yard somehow. ...

I finally went to sleep and dreamed that Cousin Rush robbed Miss Tessie of all the Heritage Festival money. He got by with it because he was wearing a mask and all the men in the crowd he joined afterward wore masks. Nobody knew which masked man had the money. I woke up. Then I went to sleep again and this time I dreamed Cousin Rush didn't get away with it after all. He came out of the theater with the money still in his hands, and the old black cat cast a spell on him and made him throw the money in the air.

And I dreamed the old cat was really a witch in disguise.

When I woke up, it was Halloween Day and I still didn't know what to do about Cousin Rush. Maybe I was suspicious of him because I didn't like him.

But later in the day, as I listened to him talk with Miss Tessie, I became more alarmed. Oh, it was just general talk, discussion of the fact that Cajun Caton wasn't really a cajun. He was from Henry County, Tennessee, and he had picked up that nickname in Louisiana in what Miss Tessie described as an "indiscreet house."

I watched as Cousin Rush got his Oldsmobile filled with gas and the tires and oil checked. Looked like he was planning for a trip. He couldn't go to Houston, because police would arrest him if he went back there. He'd have trouble with his fourth wife in Dallas, and was wanted on charges there. But the way he was fussing around his car, it looked as if he would go somewhere in a hurry.

Long before the Heritage Play started that night, he parked his car on the north side of the plaza near the biggest rosebush. Then he went into the theater early, carrying a cape and a mask as some other men were doing.

I stood looking across the plaza, worried. The black cat came

from the rosebushes, sat on the base of the fountain, and stared back at me. Darkness came, and a full moon rose. Stars shone.

Looking at that cat, I knew what I had to do. Maybe it wouldn't work, but maybe it would. I had to try.

After the play was well under way, with everyone except me in the theater, I got a long fishing pole and some cord. Cautiously, holding my breath at times, I carried that animal cage-trap the three blocks to the plaza. The skunk, his belly full of cornbread and cabbage and beans, slept most of the time.

I learned later that during the last two minutes of the play a man wearing a mask and a cape went inside the box office where Miss Tessie was counting money. He didn't speak a word, but he pushed a small pistol in Miss Tessie's face and motioned for her to sit down. He tied her to the chair. She opened her mouth to scream, and he jammed a handkerchief in it. Nobody would have heard if she had screamed because the audience and the cast were singing the finale.

The man put his pistol inside his cape, took handfuls of the paper money she'd been sorting. He stuffed money in his pockets and inside the cape pockets, and left with some money in his hands.

He walked out of the theater as the townspeople, wearing capes and masks, also walked out.

I knew which one was Cousin Rush. I could tell by the prissy walk and the dumpy figure.

A couple of kids ran ahead of him across the plaza, but I pulled the cord I had rigged to the trap door. With that door open, and with all the noise, the skunk would come out. He would not be disturbed or afraid, because skunks are not usually afraid. Even a grizzly bear would tippity-toe around a skunk.

The two kids apparently saw him, hollered, "Uh-oh," detoured slightly, and kept running. Cousin Rush paid them no attention.

Then Miss Tessie's old black cat ran out of the rosebushes, ran right in front of Cousin Rush, ran back into the bushes.

Cousin Rush slowed in his fast walk to the Oldsmobile. It was a beautiful night, bright as day with white moonlight and black shadows. Just as Cousin Rush got near his car, a small black animal came out of the rosebushes again, right in front of him.

If he had climbed in his car without noticing, he would have gotten away with robbery. Being Cousin Rush and being naturally mean, and probably thinking this was Miss Tessie's old black cat, he kicked the skunk.

Then he bent over, ready to kick again. He got that spray full in his face. He staggered back, threw both arms in the air, hands spread wide. Money fluttered high, caught the wind, and blew all over the plaza. Cousin Rush fought for breath, ran into the monument, bounced off, stumbled against the fountain, coughed, gasped, vomited, waved his hands again.

He tore off his mask and cape, and money came from the pockets inside the cape and swirled in the air. People stood watching, wondering.

Somebody found Miss Tessie bound and gagged and cut her loose. She ran into the street, screaming she'd been robbed.

With all those dollar bills and five dollar bills and ten dollar bills floating in the air around Cousin Rush, he became the Prime Suspect. Nobody went near him for a while, though. The smell was nauseating.

Finally Sheriff Mitchell spoke firm words to Deputy Haskins. Haskins looked reluctant, but Mitchell gave the orders. Don't take him to our clean jail, he said. Take him to the old county stables and lock him up for the night.

The skunk got away in all the excitement. Nobody would have touched him anyway. I knew I would pick up the cage-trap when everybody left, or I'd be incriminated. I didn't want Mama to know I'd had anything to do with trapping Cousin Rush.

Citizens picked up the money that was blowing around and put it in a well-ventilated place for the night. Then people left for the American Legion Barbecue and Dance. Some of those who had gotten close to skunk smell while picking up the money might have to stay outside the Legion Hall, but they'd eat barbecue and drink Blanton Creek bourbon and they'd survive.

As the crowd left the plaza, and as Deputy Haskins started Cousin Rush walking twenty feet ahead of him to the stables, I saw Miss Tessie's old black cat sitting on the base of the fountain. Her eyes glinted in the Halloween moonlight, and I'll swear that cat was laughing.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Bottle Imp



by
**Robert Louis
Stevenson**

Note. Any student of that very unliterary product, the English drama of the early part of the century, will here recognize the name and the root idea of a piece once rendered popular by the redoubtable B. Smith. The root idea is there and identical, and yet I believe I have made it a new thing. And the fact that the tale has been designed and written for a Polynesian audience may lend it some extraneous interest nearer home.

R. L. S.

There was a man of the island of Hawaii, whom I shall call Keawe; for the truth is, he still lives, and his name must be kept secret; but the place of his birth was not far from Honaunau, where the bones of Keawe the Great lie hidden in a cave. This man was poor, brave, and active; he could read and write like a schoolmaster; he was a first-rate mariner besides, sailed for some time in the island steamers, and steered a whaleboat on the Hamakua coast. At length it came to Keawe's mind to have a sight of the great world and foreign cities, and he shipped on a vessel bound to San Francisco.

This is a fine town, with a fine harbor, and rich people uncountable; and, in particular, there is one hill which is covered with palaces. Upon this hill Keawe was one day taking a walk, with his pocket full of money, viewing the great house upon either hand with pleasure. "What fine houses these are!" he was thinking, "and how happy must these people be who dwell in them, and take no care for the morrow!" The thought was in his mind when he came abreast of a house that was smaller than some others, but all finished and beautiful like a toy; the steps of that house shone like silver, and the borders of the garden bloomed like garlands, and the windows were bright like diamonds; and Keawe stopped and wondered at the excellence of all he saw. So stopping, he was aware of a man that looked forth upon him through a window, so clear, that Keawe could see him as you see a fish in a pool upon the reef. The man was elderly, with a bald head and a black beard; and his face was heavy with sorrow, and he bitterly sighed. And the truth of it is, that as Keawe looked in upon the man, and the man looked out upon Keawe, each envied the other.

All of a sudden the man smiled and nodded, and beckoned Keawe to enter, and met him at the door of the house.

"This is a fine house of mine," said the man, and bitterly sighed. "Would you not care to view the chambers?"

So he led Keawe all over it, from the cellar to the roof, and there

was nothing there that was not perfect of its kind, and Keawe was astonished.

"Truly," said Keawe, "this is a beautiful house; if I lived in the like of it, I should be laughing all day long. How comes it, then, that you should be sighing?"

"There is no reason," said the man, "why you should not have a house in all points similar to this, and finer, if you wish. You have some money, I suppose?"

"I have fifty dollars," said Keawe; "but a home like this will cost more than fifty dollars."

The man made a computation. "I am sorry you have no more," said he, "for it may raise you trouble in the future, but it shall be yours at fifty dollars."

"The house?" said Keawe.

"No, not the house," replied the man; "but the bottle. For, I must tell you, although I appear to you so rich and fortunate, all my fortune, and this house itself and its garden, came out of a bottle not much bigger than a pint. This is it."

And he opened a lockfast place, and took out a round-bellied bottle with a long neck; the glass of it was white like milk, with changing rainbow colors in the grain. Within sides something obscurely moved, like a shadow and a fire.

"This is the bottle," said the man; and, when Keawe laughed, "You do not believe me?" he added. "Try, then, for yourself. See if you can break it."

So Keawe took the bottle up and dashed it on the floor till he was weary; but it jumped on the floor like a child's ball, and was not injured. "This is a strange thing," said Keawe. "For by the touch of it, as well as by the look, the bottle should be glass."

"Of glass it is," replied the man, sighing more heavily than ever; "but the glass of it was tempered in the flames of hell. An imp lives in it, and that is the shadow we behold there moving; or, so I suppose. If any man buys this bottle the imp is at his command; all that he desires—love, fame, money, houses like this house, ay, a city like this city—all are his at the word uttered. Napoleon had this bottle, and by it he grew to be the king of the world; but he sold it at the last and fell. Captain Cook had this bottle, and by it he found his way to so many islands; but he, too, sold it, and was slain upon Hawaii. For, once it is sold, the power goes and the protection; and unless a man remain content with what he has, ill will befall him."

"And yet you talk of selling it yourself?" Keawe said.

"I have all I wish, and I am growing elderly," replied the man. "There is one thing the imp cannot do—he cannot prolong life; and it would not be fair to conceal from you there is a drawback to the bottle; for if a man die before he sells it, he must burn in hell forever."

"To be sure, that is a drawback and no mistake," cried Keawe. "I would not meddle with the thing. I can do without a house, thank God; but there is one thing I could not be doing with one particle, and that is to be damned."

"Dear man, you must not run away from things," returned the man. "All you have to do is to use the power of the imp in moderation, and then sell it to someone else, as I do to you, and finish your life in comfort."

"Well, I observe two things," said Keawe. "All the time you keep sighing like a maid in love, that is one; and, for the other, you sell this bottle very cheap."

"I have told you already why I sigh," said the man. "It is because I fear my health is breaking up; and, as you said yourself, to die and go to the devil is a pity for anyone. As for why I sell so cheap, I must explain to you there is a peculiarity about the bottle. Long ago, when the devil brought it first upon earth, it was extremely expensive, and was sold first of all to Prester John for many millions of dollars; but it cannot be sold at all, unless sold at a loss. If you sell it for as much as you paid for it, back it comes to you again like a homing pigeon. It follows that the price has kept falling in these centuries, and the bottle is now remarkably cheap. I bought it myself from one of my great neighbors on this hill, and the price I paid was only ninety dollars. I could sell it for as high as eighty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents, but not a penny dearer, or back the thing must come to me. Now, about this there are two bothers. First, when you offer a bottle so singular for eighty-odd dollars, people suppose you to be jesting. And second—but there is no hurry about that—and I need not go into it. Only remember it must be coined money that you sell it for."

"How am I to know that this is all true?" asked Keawe.

"Some of it you can try at once," replied the man. "Give me your fifty dollars, take the bottle, and wish your fifty dollars back into your pocket. If that does not happen, I pledge you my honor I will cry off the bargain and restore your money."

"You are not deceiving me?" said Keawe.

The man bound himself with a great oath.

"Well, I will risk that much," said Keawe, "for that can do no harm," and he paid over his money to the man, and the man handed him the bottle.

"Imp of the bottle," said Keawe, "I want my fifty dollars back." And sure enough, he had scarce said the word before his pocket was as heavy as ever.

"To be sure this is a wonderful bottle," said Keawe.

"And now good morning to you, my fine fellow, and the devil go with you for me," said the man.

"Hold on," said Keawe, "I don't want any more of this fun. Here, take your bottle back."

"You have bought it for less than I paid for it," replied the man, rubbing his hands. "It is yours now; and for my part, I am only concerned to see the back of you." And with that he rang for his Chinese servant, and had Keawe shown out of the house.

Now, when Keawe was in the street, with the bottle under his arm, he began to think. "If all is true about this bottle, I may have made a losing bargain," thinks he. "But, perhaps the man was only fooling me." The first thing he did was to count his money; the sum was exact—forty-nine dollars American money, and one Chili piece. "That looks like the truth," said Keawe. "Now I will try another part."

The streets in that part of the city were as clean as a ship's decks, and though it was noon, there were no passengers. Keawe set the bottle in the gutter and walked away. Twice he looked back, and there was the milky, round-bellied bottle where he left it. A third time he looked back, and turned a corner; but he had scarce done so, when something knocked upon his elbow, and behold! It was the long neck sticking up; and, as for the rounded belly, it was jammed into the pocket of his pilot-coat.

"And that looks like the truth," said Keawe.

The next thing he did was to buy a corkscrew in a shop, and go apart into a secret place in the fields. And there he tried to draw the cork, but as often as he put the screw in, out it came again, and the cork as whole as ever.

"This is some new sort of cork," said Keawe, and all at once he began to shake and sweat, for he was afraid of that bottle.

On his way back to the portside he saw a shop where a man sold shells and clubs from the wild islands, old heathen deities, old coined money, pictures from China and Japan, and all manner of

things that sailors bring in their sea chests. And here he had an idea. So he went in and offered the bottle for a hundred dollars. The man of the shop laughed at him at first, and offered him five; but, indeed, it was a curious bottle, such glass was never blown in any human glassworks, so prettily the colors shone under the milky white, and so strangely the shadow hovered in the midst; so, after he had disputed awhile after the manner of his kind, the shopman gave Keawe sixty silver dollars for the thing and set it on a shelf in the midst of his window.

"Now," said Keawe, "I have sold that for sixty which I bought for fifty—or, to say truth, a little less, because one of my dollars was from Chili. Now I shall know the truth upon another point."

So he went back on board his ship, and when he opened his chest, there was the bottle, and had come more quickly than himself. Now Keawe had a mate on board whose name was Lopaka.

"What ails you?" said Lopaka, "that you stare in your chest?"

They were alone in the ship's forecastle, and Keawe bound him to secrecy, and told all.

"This is a very strange affair," said Lopaka; "and I fear you will be in trouble about this bottle. But there is one point very clear—that you are sure of the trouble, and you had better have the profit in the bargain. Make up your mind what you want with it; give the order, and if it is done as you desire, I will buy the bottle myself; for I have an idea of my own to get a schooner, and go trading through the islands."

"That is not my idea," said Keawe; "but to have a beautiful house and garden on the Kona Coast, where I was born, the sun shining in at the doors, flowers in the garden, glass in the windows; pictures on the walls, and toys and fine carpets on the tables, for all the world like the house I was in this day—only a story higher, and with balconies all about like the king's palace; and to live there without care and make merry with my friends and relatives."

"Well," said Lopaka, "let us carry it back with us to Hawaii; and if all comes true, as you suppose, I will buy the bottle, as I said, and ask a schooner."

Upon that they were agreed, and it was not long before the ship returned to Honolulu, carrying Keawe and Lopaka, and the bottle. They were scarce come ashore when they met a friend upon the beach, who began at once to condole with Keawe.

"I do not know what I am to be consoled about," said Keawe.

"Is it possible that you have not heard," said the friend, "your

uncle—that good old man—is dead, and your cousin—that beautiful boy—was drowned at sea?”

Keawe was filled with sorrow, and, beginning to weep and to lament, he forgot about the bottle. But Lopaka was thinking to himself, and presently, when Keawe's grief was a little abated, "I have been thinking," said Lopaka, "had not your uncle lands in Hawaii, in the district of Kau?"

"No," said Keawe, "not in Kau: they are on the mountainside—a little by south Hookena."

"These lands will now be yours?" asked Lopaka.

"And so they will," says Keawe, and began again to lament for his relatives.

"No," said Lopaka, "do not lament at present. I have a thought in my mind. How if this should be the doing of the bottle? For here is the place ready for your house."

"If this be so," cried Keawe, "it is a very ill way to serve me by killing my relatives. But it may be, indeed; for it was in just such a station that I saw the house with my mind's eye."

"The house, however, is not yet built," said Lopaka.

"No, nor like to be!" said Keawe; "for though my uncle has some coffee and ava and bananas, it will not be more than will keep me in comfort; and the rest of that land is the black lava."

"Let us go to the lawyer," said Lopaka; "I have still this idea in my mind."

Now, when they came to the lawyer's, it appeared Keawe's uncle had grown monstrous rich in the last days, and there was a fund of money.

"And here is the money for the house!" cried Lopaka.

"If you are thinking of a new house," said the lawyer, "here is the card of a new architect, of whom they tell me great things."

"Better and better!" cried Lopaka. "Here is all made plain for us. Let us continue to obey orders."

So they went to the architect, and he had drawings of a house on his table.

"You want something out of the way," said the architect. "How do you like this?" and he handed a drawing to Keawe.

Now, when Keawe set eyes on the drawing, he cried out aloud, for it was the picture of his thought exactly drawn.

"I am in for this house," thought he. "Little as I like the way it comes to me, I am in for it now, and I may as well take the good along with the evil."

So he told the architect all that he wished, and how he would have that house furnished, and about the pictures on the walls and the knickknacks on the tables; and he asked the man plainly for how much he would undertake the whole affair.

The architect put many questions, and took his pen and made a computation; and when he had done he named the very sum that Keawe had inherited.

Lopaka and Keawe looked at one another and nodded.

"It is quite clear," thought Keawe, "that I am to have this house, whether or no. It comes from the devil, and I fear I will get little good by that; and of one thing I am sure, I will make no wishes as long as I have this bottle. But with the house I am saddled; and I may as well take the good along with the evil."

So he made his terms with the architect, and they signed a paper; and Keawe and Lopaka took ship again and sailed to Australia; for it was concluded between them they should not interfere at all, but leave the architect and the bottle imp to build and to adorn that house at their own pleasure.

The voyage was a good voyage, only all the time Keawe was holding in his breath, for he had sworn he would utter no more wishes, and take no more favors, from the devil. The time was up when they got back. The architect told them that the house was ready, and Keawe and Lopaka took a passage in the *Hall*, and went down Kona way to view the house, and see if all had been done fitly according to the thought that was in Keawe's mind.

Now, the house stood on the mountainside, visible to ships. Above, the forest ran up into the clouds of rain; below, the dark lava fell in cliffs, where the kings of old lay buried. A garden bloomed about that house with every hue of flowers; and there was an orchard of papaia on the one hand and an orchard of herdprint on the other, and right in front, toward the sea, a ship's mast had been rigged up and bore a flag. As for the house, it was three stories high, with great chambers and broad balconies on each. The windows were of glass, so excellent that it was as clear as water and as bright as day. All manner of furniture adorned the chambers. Pictures hung upon the walls in golden frames—pictures of ships, and men fighting, and of the most beautiful women, and of singular places; nowhere in the world are there pictures of so bright a color as those Keawe found hanging in his house. As for the knickknacks they were extraordinarily fine: chiming clocks and musical boxes, little men with nodding heads, books filled with pictures, weapons of

price from all quarters of the world, and the most elegant puzzles to entertain the leisure of a solitary man. And as no one would care to live in such chambers, only to walk through and view them, the balconies were made so broad that a whole town might have lived upon them in delight; and Keawe knew not which to prefer, whether the back porch, where you get the land breeze, and looked upon the orchards and the flowers, or the front balcony, where you could drink the wind of the sea, and look down the steep wall of the mountain and see the *Hall* going by once a week or so between Hookena and the hills of Pele, or the schooners plying up the coast for wood and ava and bananas.

When they had viewed all, Keawe and Lopaka sat on the porch.

"Well," said Lopaka, "is it all as you designed?"

"Words cannot utter it," said Keawe. "It is better than I dreamed, and I am sick with satisfaction."

"There is but one thing to consider," said Lopaka, "all this may be quite natural, and the bottle imp have nothing whatever to say to it. If I were to buy the bottle, and got no schooner after all, I should have put my hand in the fire for nothing. I gave you my word, I know; but yet I think you would not grudge me one more proof."

"I have sworn I would take no more favors," said Keawe. "I have gone already deep enough."

"This is no favor I am thinking of," replied Lopaka. "It is only to see the imp himself. There is nothing to be gained by that, and so nothing to be ashamed of, and yet, if I once saw him, I should be sure of the whole matter. So indulge me so far, and let me see the imp; and, after that, here is the money in my hand, and I will buy it."

"There is only one thing I am afraid of," said Keawe. "The imp may be very ugly to view, and if you once set eyes upon him you might be very undesirous of the bottle."

"I am a man of my word," said Lopaka. "And here is the money betwixt us."

"Very well," replied Keawe, "I have a curiosity myself. So come, let us have one look at you, Mr. Imp."

Now as soon as that was said, the imp looked out of the bottle, and in again, swift as a lizard; and there sat Keawe and Lopaka turned to stone. The night had quite come, before either found a thought to say or voice to say it with; and then Lopaka pushed the money over and took the bottle.

"I am a man of my word," said he, "and had need to be so, or I would not touch the bottle with my foot. Well, I shall get my schooner and a dollar or two for my pocket; and then I will be rid of this devil as fast as I can. For to tell you the plain truth, the look of him has cast me down."

"Lopaka," said Keawe, "do not you think any worse of me than you can help; I know it is night, and the roads bad, and the pass by the tombs an ill place to go by so late, but I declare since I have seen that little face, I cannot eat or sleep or pray till it is gone from me. I will give you a lantern, and a basket to put the bottle in, and any picture or fine thing in all my house that takes your fancy; and be gone at once, and go sleep at Hookena with Nahinu."

"Keawe," said Lopaka, "many a man would take this ill; above all, when I am doing you a turn so friendly, as to keep my word and buy the bottle; and for that matter, the night and the dark, and the way by the tombs, must be all tenfold more dangerous to a man with such a sin upon his conscience, and such a bottle under his arm. But for my part, I am so extremely terrified myself, I have not the heart to blame you. Here I go, then; and I pray God you may be happy in your house, and I fortunate with my schooner, and both get to heaven in the end in spite of the devil and his bottle."

So Lopaka went down the mountain; and Keawe stood in his front balcony, and listened to the clink of the horse's shoes, and watched the lantern go shining down the path, and along the cliff of caves where the old dead are buried; and all the time he trembled and clasped his hands, and prayed for his friend, and gave glory to God that he himself was escaped out of that trouble.

But the next day came very brightly, and that new house of his was so delightful to behold that he forgot his terrors. One day followed another, and Keawe dwelt there in perpetual joy. He had his place on the back porch; it was there he ate and lived, and read the stories in the Honolulu newspapers; but when anyone came by they would go in and view the chambers and the pictures. And the fame of the house went far and wide; it was called Ka-Hale Nui—the Great House—in all Kona; and sometimes the Bright House, for Keawe kept a Chinaman, who was all day dusting and furbishing; and the glass, and the gilt, and the fine stuffs, and the pictures, shone as bright as the morning. As for Keawe himself, he could not walk in the chambers without singing, his heart was so enlarged; and when ships sailed by upon the sea, he would fly his colors on the mast.

So time went by, until one day Keawe went upon a visit as far as Kailua to certain of his friends. There he was feasted; and left as soon as he could the next morning, and rode hard, for he was impatient to behold his beautiful house; and, besides, the night then coming on, was the night in which the dead of old days go abroad on the sides of Kona; and having already meddled with the devil, he was the more chary of meeting with the dead. A little beyond Honaunau, looking far ahead, he was aware of a woman bathing in the edge of the sea; and she seemed a well-grown girl, but he thought no more of it. Then he saw her white shift flutter as she put it on, and then her red holoku; and by the time he came abreast of her she was done with her toilet, and had come up from the sea, and stood by the sidetrack in her red holoku, and she was all freshened with the bath, and her eyes shone and were kind. Now Keawe no sooner beheld her than he drew rein.

"I thought I knew everyone in this country," said he. "How comes it that I do not know you?"

"I am Kokua, daughter of Kiano," said the girl, "and I have just returned from Oahu. Who are you?"

"I will tell you who I am in a little," said Keawe, dismounting from his horse, "but not now. For I have a thought in my mind, and if you knew who I was, you might have heard of me, and would not give me a true answer. But tell me, first of all, one thing: are you married?"

At this Kokua laughed out aloud. "It is you who ask questions," she said. "Are you married yourself?"

"Indeed, Kokua, I am not," replied Keawe, "and never thought to be until this hour. But here is the plain truth. I have met you here at the roadside, and I saw your eyes, which are like the stars, and my heart went to you as swift as a bird. And so now, if you want none of me, say so, and I will go on to my own place; but if you think me no worse than any other young man, say so, too, and I will turn aside to your father's for the night, and tomorrow I will talk with the good man."

Kokua said never a word, but she looked at the sea and laughed.

"Kokua," said Keawe, "if you say nothing, I will take that for the good answer; so let us be stepping to your father's door."

She went on ahead of him, still without speech; only sometimes she glanced back and glanced away again, and she kept the strings of her hat in her mouth.

Now, when they had come to the door, Kiano came out on his veranda and cried out and welcomed Keawe by name. At that the

girl looked down, for the fame of the great house had come to her ears; and, to be sure, it was a great temptation. All that evening they were very merry together; and the girl was as bold as brass under the eyes of her parents, and made a mark of Keawe, for she had a quick wit. The next day he had a word with Kiano, and found the girl alone.

"Kokua," said he, "you made a mark of me all the evening; and it is still time to bid me go. I would not tell you who I was, because I have so fine a house, and I feared you would think too much of that house and too little of the man that loves you. Now you know all, and if you wish to have seen the last of me, say so at once."

"No," said Kokua, but this time she did not laugh, nor did Keawe ask for more.

This was the wooing of Keawe; things had gone quickly; but so an arrow goes, and the ball of a rifle swifter still, and yet both may strike the target. Things had gone fast, but they had gone far also, and the thought of Keawe rang in the maiden's head; she heard his voice in the breath of the surf upon the lava, and for this young man that she had seen but twice she would have left father and mother and her native islands. As for Keawe himself, his horse flew up the path of the mountain under the cliff of tombs, and the sound of the hoofs, and the sound of Keawe singing to himself for pleasure, echoed in the caverns of the dead. He came to the Bright House, and still he was singing. He sat and ate in the broad balcony, and the Chinaman wondered at his master, to hear how he sang between the mouthfuls. The sun went down into the sea, and the night came; and Keawe walked the balconies by lamplight, high on the mountains, and the voice of his singing startled men on ships.

"Here am I now upon my high place," he said to himself. "Life may be no better; this is the mountain top; and all shelves about me toward the worse. For the first time I will light up the chambers, and bathe in my fine bath with the hot water and the cold, and sleep above in the bed of my bridal chamber."

So the Chinaman had word, and he must rise from sleep and light the furnaces; and as he walked below, beside the boilers, he heard his master singing and rejoicing above him in the lighted chambers. When the water began to be hot the Chinaman cried to his master: and Keawe went into the bathroom; and the Chinaman heard him sing as he filled the marble basin; and heard him sing, and the singing broken, as he undressed; until of a sudden, the

song ceased. The Chinaman listened, and listened; he called up the house to Keawe to ask if all were well, and Keawe answered him "Yes," and bade him go to bed; but there was no more singing in the Bright House; and all night long the Chinaman heard his master's feet go round and round the balconies without repose.

Now, the truth of it was this: as Keawe undressed for his bath, he spied upon his flesh a patch like a patch of lichen on a rock, and it was then that he stopped singing. For he knew the likeness of that patch, and knew that he was fallen in the Chinese Evil.

Now, it's a sad thing for any man to fall into this sickness. And it would be a sad thing for anyone to leave a house so beautiful and so commodious, and depart from all his friends to the north coast of Molokai, between the mighty cliff and the sea breakers. But what was that to the case of the man Keawe, he who had met his love but yesterday, and won her but that morning, and now saw all his hopes break, in a moment, like a piece of glass?

Awhile he sat upon the edge of the bath, then sprang, with a cry, and ran outside; and to and fro, along the balcony, like one despairing.

"Very willingly could I leave Hawaii, the home of my fathers," Keawe was thinking. "Very lightly could I leave my house, the high-placed, the many-windowed, here upon the mountains. Very bravely could I go to Molokai, to Kalaupapa by the cliffs, to live with the smitten and to sleep there, far from my fathers. But what wrong have I done, what sin lies upon my soul, that I should have encountered Kokua coming cool from the sea water in the evening? Kokua, the soul ensnarer! Kokua, the light of my life! Her may I never wed, her may I look upon no longer, her may I no more handle with my loving hand; and it is for this, it is for you, O Kokua, that I pour my lamentations!"

Now you are to observe what sort of a man Keawe was, for he might have dwelt there in the Bright House for years, and no one been the wiser of his sickness; but he reckoned nothing of that, if he must lose Kokua. And again he might have wed Kokua even as he was; and so many would have done, because they have the souls of pigs; but Keawe loved the maiden manfully, and he would do her no hurt and bring her in no danger.

A little beyond the midst of the night, there came in his mind the recollection of that bottle. He went round to the back porch, and called to memory the day when the devil had looked forth; and at the thought ice ran in his veins.

"A dreadful thing is the bottle," thought Keawe, "and dreadful is the imp, and it is a dreadful thing to risk the flames of hell. But what other hope have I to cure my sickness or to wed Kokua? What!" he thought, "would I beard the devil once, only to get me a house, and not face him again to win Kokua?"

Thereupon he called to mind it was the next day the *Hall* went by on her return to Honolulu. "There must I go first," he thought, "and see Lopaka. For the best hope that I have now is to find that same bottle I was so pleased to be rid of."

Never a wink could he sleep; the food stuck in his throat; but he sent a letter to Kiano, and about the time when the steamer would be coming, rode down beside the cliff of the tombs. It rained; his horse went heavily; he looked up at the black mouths of the caves, and he envied the dead that slept there and were done with trouble; and called to mind how he had galloped by the day before, and was astonished. So he came down to Hookena, and there was all the country gathered for the steamer as usual. In the shed before the store they sat and jested and passed the news; but there was no matter of speech in Keawe's bosom, and he sat in their midst and looked without on the rain falling on the houses, and the surf beating among the rocks, and the sighs rose in his throat.

"Keawe of the Bright House is out of spirits," said one to another. Indeed, and so he was; and little wonder.

Then the *Hall* came, and the whaleboat carried him on board. The after part of the ship was full of Haoles—whites—who had been to visit the volcano, as their custom is; and the midst was crowded with Kanakas, and the forepart with wild bulls from Hilo and horses from Kau; but Keawe sat apart from all in his sorrow, and watched for the house of Kiano. There it sat low upon the shore in the black rocks, and shaded by the coron palms, and there by the door was a red holoku, no greater than a fly, and going to and fro with a fly's business. "Ah, queen of my heart," he cried, "I'll venture my dear soul to win you!"

Soon after darkness fell and the cabins were lit up, and the Haoles sat and played at the cards and drank whisky as their custom is; but Keawe walked the deck all night; and all the next day, as they steamed under the lea of Maui or Molokai, he was still pacing to and fro like a wild animal in a menagerie.

Toward evening they passed Diamond Head, and came to the pier of Honolulu. Keawe stepped out among the crowd and began to ask for Lopaka. It seemed that he had become the owner of a

schooner—none better in the islands—and was gone upon an adventure as far as Pola-Pola or Kahiki; so there was no help to be looked for from Lopaka. Keawe called to mind a friend of his, a lawyer in the town (I must not tell his name), and inquired of him. They said he was grown suddenly rich, and had a fine new house upon Waikiki shore; and this put a thought in Keawe's head, and he called a hack and drove to the lawyer's house.

The house was all brand new, and the trees in the garden no greater than walking sticks, and the lawyer, when he came, had the air of a man well pleased. "What can I do to serve you?"

"You are a friend of Lopaka's," replied Keawe, "and Lopaka purchased from me a certain piece of goods that I thought you might enable me to trace."

The lawyer's face became very dark. "I do not profess to misunderstand you, Mr. Keawe," said he, "though this is an ugly business to be stirring in. You may be sure I know nothing, but yet I have a guess, and if you would apply in a certain quarter I think you might have news."

And he named the name of a man, which, again, I had better not repeat. So it was for days, and Keawe went from one to another, finding everywhere new clothes and carriages, and fine new houses and men everywhere in great contentment, although, to be sure, when he hinted at his business their faces would cloud over.

"No doubt I am upon the track," thought Keawe. "These new clothes and carriages are all the gifts of the little imp, and these glad faces of men who have taken their profit and got rid of the accursed thing in safety. When I see pale cheeks and hear sighing, I shall know that I am near the bottle."

So it befell at last that he was recommended to a Haole in Beritania Street. When he came to the door, about the hour of the evening meal, there were the usual marks of the new house, and the young garden, and the electric light shining in the windows; but when the owner came, a shock of hope and fear ran through Keawe; for here was a young man, white as a corpse, and black about the eyes, the hair shedding from his head, and such a look in his countenance as a man may have when he is waiting for the gallows.

"Here it is, to be sure," thought Keawe, and so with this man he noways veiled his errand. "I am come to buy the bottle," said he.

At the word, the young Haole of Beritania Street reeled against the wall.

"The bottle!" he gasped. "To buy the bottle!" Then he seemed to choke, and seizing Keawe by the arm, carried him into a room and poured out wine in two glasses.

"Here is my respects," said Keawe, who had been much about with Haoles in his time. "Yes," he added, "I am come to buy the bottle. What is the price by now?"

At that word the young man let his glass slip through his fingers, and looked upon Keawe like a ghost.

"The price," says he; "the price! You do not know the price?"

"It is for that I am asking you," returned Keawe. "But why are you so much concerned? Is there anything wrong about the price?"

"It has dropped a great deal in value since your time, Mr. Keawe," said the young man, stammering.

"Well, well, I shall have the less to pay for it," says Keawe. "How much did it cost you?"

The young man was as white as a sheet. "Two cents," said he.

"What?" cried Keawe, "two cents? Why, then, you can only sell it for one. And he who buys it—" The words died upon Keawe's tongue; he who bought it could never sell it again, the bottle and the bottle imp must abide with him until he died, and when he died must carry him to the red end of hell.

The young man of Beritania Street fell upon his knees. "For God's sake, buy it!" he cried. "You can have all my fortune in the bargain. I was mad when I bought it at that price. I had embezzled money at my store; I was lost else; I must have gone to jail."

"Poor creature," said Keawe, "you would risk your soul upon so desperate an adventure, and to avoid the proper punishment of your own disgrace; and you think I could hesitate with love in front of me. Give me the bottle, and the change which I make sure you have all ready. Here is a five-cent piece."

It was as Keawe supposed; the young man had the change ready in a drawer; the bottle changed hands, and Keawe's fingers were no sooner clasped upon the stalk than he had breathed his wish to be a clean man. And, sure enough, when he got home to his room, and stripped himself before a glass, his flesh was whole like an infant's. And here was the strange thing: he had no sooner seen this miracle than his mind was changed within him, and he cared naught for the Chinese Evil, and little enough for Kokua; and had but the one thought, that here he was bound to the bottle imp for time and for eternity, and had no better hope but to be a cinder

forever in the flames of hell. Away ahead of him he saw them blaze with his mind's eye, and his soul shrank, and darkness fell upon the light.

When Keawe came to himself a little, he was aware it was the night when the band played at the hotel. Thither he went, because he feared to be alone; and there, among happy faces, walked to and fro, and heard the tunes go up and down, and saw Berger beat the measure, and all the while he heard the flames crackle, and saw the red fire burning in the bottomless pit. Of a sudden the band played Hiki-ao-ao; that was a song that he had sung with Kokua, and at the strain courage returned to him.

"It is done now," he thought, "and once more let me take the good along with the evil."

So it befell that he returned to Hawaii by the first steamer, and as soon as it could be managed he was wedded to Kokua, and carried her up the mountainside to the Bright House.

Now it was so with these two, that when they were together Keawe's heart was stilled; but as soon as he was alone he fell into a brooding horror, and heard the flames crackle, and saw the red fire burn in the bottomless pit. The girl, indeed, had come to him wholly; her heart leaped in her side at sight of him, her hand clung to his; and she was so fashioned, from the hair upon her head to the nails upon her toes, that none could see her without joy. She was pleasant in her nature. She had the good word always. Full of song she was, and went to and fro in the Bright House, the brightest thing in its three stories, caroling like the birds. And Keawe beheld and heard her with delight, and then must shrink upon one side, and weep and groan to think upon the price that he had paid for her; and then he must dry his eyes, and wash his face, and go and sit with her on the broad balconies, joining in her songs, and, with a sick spirit, answering her smiles.

There came a day when her feet began to be heavy and her songs more rare; and now it was not Keawe only that would weep apart, with the whole width of the Bright House betwixt. Keawe was so sunk in his despair, he scarce observed the change, and was only glad he had more hours to sit alone and brood upon his destiny, and was not so frequently condemned to pull a smiling face on a sick heart. But one day, coming softly through the house, he heard the sound of a child sobbing, and there was Kokua rolling her face upon the balcony floor, and weeping like the lost.

"You do well to weep in this house, Kokua," he said. "And yet I would give the head off my body that you (at least) might have been happy."

"Happy!" she cried. "Keawe, when you lived alone in your Bright House you were the word of the island for a happy man; laughter and song were in your mouth, and your face was as bright as the sunrise. Then you wedded poor Kokua; and the good God knows what is amiss in her—but from that day you have not smiled. Oh!" she cried, "what ails me? I thought I was pretty, and I knew I loved him. What ails me, that I throw this cloud upon my husband?"

"Poor Kokua," said Keawe. He sat down by her side, and sought to take her hand; but that she plucked away. "Poor Kokua," he said, again. "My poor child—my pretty. And I had thought all this while to spare you! Well, you shall know all. Then, at least, you will pity poor Keawe; then you will understand how much he loved you in the past—that he dared hell for your possession—and how much he loves you still (the poor condemned one), that he can yet call up a smile when he beholds you."

With that, he told her all, even from the beginning.

"You have done this for me?" she cried. "Ah, well, then what do I care!" and she clasped and wept upon him.

"Ah, child!" said Keawe, "and yet, when I consider of the fire of hell, I care a good deal!"

"Never tell me," said she, "no man can be lost because he loved Kokua, and no other fault. I tell you, Keawe, I shall save you with these hands, or perish in your company. What! you loved me and gave your soul, and you think I will not die to save you in return?"

"Ah, my dear, you might die a hundred times, and what difference would that make," he cried, "except to leave me lonely till the time comes of my damnation?"

"You know nothing," said she. "I was educated in a school in Honolulu; I am no common girl. And I tell you I shall save my lover. What is this you say about a cent? But all the world is not America. In England they have a piece they call a farthing, which is about a half a cent. Ah! sorrow!" she cried, "that makes it scarcely better, for the buyer must be lost, and we shall find none so brave as my Keawe! But, then, there is France; they have a small coin there which they call a centime, and these go five to the cent or thereabout. We could not do better. Keawe, let us go to the French islands; let us go to Tahiti, as fast as ships can bear us. There we have four centimes, three centimes, two centimes, one centime,

four possible sales to come and go on; and two of us to push the bargain. Come, my Keawe! kiss me, and banish care. Kokua will defend you."

"Gift of God!" he cried. "I cannot think that God will punish me for desiring aught so good! Be it as you will, then, take me where you please; I put my life and my salvation in your hands."

Early the next day Kokua was about her preparations. She took Keawe's chest that he went with sailing; and first she put the bottle in a corner, and then packed it with the richest of their clothes and the bravest of the knickknacks in the house. "For," said she, "we must seem to be rich folks, or who will believe in the bottle?"

All the time of her preparation she was as gay as a bird; only when she looked upon Keawe the tears would spring in her eye, and she must run and kiss him. As for Keawe, a weight was off his soul; now that he had his secret shared, and some hope in front of him, he seemed like a new man, his feet went lightly on the earth, and his breath was good to him again. Yet was terror still at his elbow, and ever and again, as the wind blows out a taper, hope died in him, and he saw the flames toss and the red fire burn in hell.

It was given out in the country they were gone pleasuring to the States, which was thought a strange thing, and yet not so strange as the truth, if any could have guessed it. So they went to Honolulu in the *Hall*, and thence in the *Umatilla* to San Francisco with a crowd of Haoles, and at San Francisco took their passage by the mail brigantine, the *Tropic Bird*, for Papeete, the chief place of the French in the south islands. Thither they came, after a pleasant voyage, on a fair day of the trade wind, and saw the reef with the surf breaking and Motuiti with its palms, and the schooner riding withinside, and the white houses of the town low down along the shore among green trees, and overhead the mountains and the clouds of Tahiti, the wise island.

It was judged the most wise to hire a house, which they did accordingly, opposite the British consul's, to make a great parade of money, and themselves conspicuous with carriages and horses. This it was very easy to do, so long as they had the bottle in their possession; for Kokua was more bold than Keawe, and, whenever she had a mind, called on the imp for twenty or a hundred dollars. At this rate they soon grew to be remarked in the town; and the strangers from Hawaii, their riding and their driving, the fine

holokus, and the rich lace of Kokua, became the matter of much talk.

They got on well after the first with the Tahitian language, which is indeed like to the Hawaiian, with a change of certain letters; and as soon as they had any freedom of speech, began to push the bottle. You are to consider it was not an easy subject to introduce; it was not easy to persuade people you are in earnest, when you offer to sell them for four centimes the spring of health and riches inexhaustible. It was necessary besides to explain the dangers of the bottle; and either people disbelieved the whole thing and laughed, or they thought the more of the darker part, became overcast with gravity, and drew away from Keawe and Kokua, as from persons who had dealings with the devil. So far from gaining ground, these two began to find they were avoided in the town; the children ran away from them screaming, a thing intolerable to Kokua; Catholics crossed themselves as they went by; and all persons began with one accord to disengage themselves from their advances.

Depression fell upon their spirits. They would sit at night in their new house, after a day's weariness, and not exchange one word, or the silence would be broken by Kokua bursting suddenly into sobs. Sometimes they would pray together; sometimes they would have the bottle out upon the floor, and sit all evening watching how the shadow hovered in the midst. At such times they would be afraid to go to rest. It was long ere slumber came to them, and, if either dozed off, it would be to wake and find the other silently weeping in the dark, or, perhaps, to wake alone, the other having fled from the house and the neighborhood of that bottle, to pace under the bananas in the little garden, or to wander on the beach by moonlight.

One night it was so when Kokua awoke. Keawe was gone. She felt in the bed and his place was cold. Then fear fell upon her, and she sat up in bed. A little moonshine filtered through the shutters. The room was bright, and she could spy the bottle on the floor. Outside it blew high, the great trees of the avenue cried aloud, and the fallen leaves rattled in the veranda. In the midst of this Kokua was aware of another sound; whether of a beast or of a man she could scarce tell, but it was as sad as death, and cut her to the soul. Softly she arose, set the door ajar, and looked forth into the moonlit yard. There, under the bananas, lay Keawe, his mouth in the dust, and as he lay he moaned.

It was Kokua's first thought to run forward and console him; her second potentially withheld her. Keawe had borne himself before his wife like a brave man; it became her little in the hour of weakness to intrude upon his shame. With the thought she drew back into the house.

"Heaven," she thought, "how careless have I been—how weak! It is he, not I, that stands in this eternal peril; it was he, not I, that took the curse upon his soul. It is for my sake, and for the love of a creature of so little worth and such poor help, that he now beholds so close to him the flames of hell—ay, and smells the smoke of it, lying without there in the wind and moonlight. Am I so dull of spirit that never till now I have surmised my duty, or have I seen it before and turned aside? But now, at least, I take up my soul in both the hands of my affection; now I say farewell to the white steps of heaven and the waiting faces of my friends. A love for a love, and let mine be equalled with Keawe's! A soul for a soul, and be it mine to perish!"

She was a deft woman with her hands, and was soon appalled. She took in her hands the change—the precious centimes they kept ever at their side; for this coin is little used, and they had made provision at a government office. When she was forth in the avenue clouds came on the wind, and the moon was blackened. The town slept, and she knew not whither to turn till she heard one coughing in the shadow of the trees.

"Old man," said Kokua, "what do you here abroad in the cold night?"

The old man could scarce express himself for coughing, but she made out that he was old and poor, and a stranger in the island.

"Will you do me a service?" said Kokua. "As one stranger to another, and as an old man to a younger woman, will you help a daughter of Hawaii?"

"Ah," said the old man. "So you are the witch from the eight islands, and even my old soul you seek to entangle. But I have heard of you, and defy your wickedness."

"Sit down here," said Kokua, "and let me tell you a tale." And she told him the story of Keawe from the beginning to the end.

"And now," said she, "I am his wife, whom he bought with his soul's welfare. And what should I do? If I went to him myself and offered to buy it, he will refuse. But if you go, he will sell it eagerly; I will await you here; you will buy it for four centimes, and I will buy it again for three. And the Lord strengthen a poor girl!"

"If you meant falsely," said the old man, "I think God would strike you dead."

"He would!" cried Kōkua. "Be sure he would. I could not be so treacherous, God would not suffer it."

"Give me the four centimes and await me here," said the old man.

Now, when Kōkua stood alone in the street, her spirit died. The wind roared in the trees, and it seemed to her the rushing of the flames of hell; the shadows towered in the light of the street lamp, and they seemed to her the snatching hands of evil ones. If she had had the strength, she must have run away, and if she had had the breath she must have screamed aloud; but, in truth, she could do neither, and stood and trembled in the avenue, like an affrighted child.

Then she saw the old man returning, and he had the bottle in his hand.

"I have done your bidding," said he, "I left your husband weeping like a child; tonight he will sleep easy." And he held the bottle forth.

"Before you give it me," Kōkua panted, "take the good with the evil—ask to be delivered from your cough."

"I am an old man," replied the other, "and too near the gate of the grave to take a favor from the devil. But what is this? Why do you not take the bottle? Do you hesitate?"

"Not hesitate!" cried Kōkua. "I am only weak. Give me a moment. It is my hand resists, my flesh shrinks back from the accursed thing. One moment only!"

The old man looked upon Kōkua kindly. "Poor child!" said he, "you fear: your soul misgives you. Well, let me keep it, I am old, and can never more be happy in this world, and as for the next—"

"Give it me!" gasped Kōkua. "There is your money. Do you think I am so base as that? Give me the bottle."

"God bless you, child," said the old man.

Kōkua concealed the bottle under her holoku, said farewell to the old man, and walked all along the avenue, she cared not whither. For all roads were now the same to her, and led equally to hell. Sometimes she walked, and sometimes ran; sometimes she screamed out loud in the night, and sometimes lay by the wayside in the dust and wept. All that she had heard of hell came back to her; she saw the flames blaze, and she smelled the smoke, and her flesh withered on the coals.

Near day she came to her mind again, and returned to the house. It was even as the old man said—Keawe slumbered like a child. Kokua stood and gazed upon his face.

"Now, my husband," said she, "it is your turn to sleep. When you wake it will be your turn to sing and laugh. But for poor Kokua, alas! that meant no evil—for poor Kokua no more sleep, no more singing, no more delight, whether in earth or Heaven."

With that she lay down in the bed by his side, and her misery was so extreme that she fell in a deep slumber instantly.

Late in the morning her husband woke her and gave her the good news. It seemed he was silly with delight, for he paid no heed to her distress, ill though she dissembled it. The words stuck in her mouth, it mattered not; Keawe did the speaking. She ate not a bite, but who was to observe it? For Keawe cleared the dish. Kokua saw and heard him, like some strange thing in a dream; there were times when she forgot or doubted, and put her hands to her brow; to know herself doomed and hear her husband babble, seemed so monstrous.

All the while Keawe was eating and talking, and planning the time of their return, and thanking her for saving him, and fondling her, and calling her the true helper after all. He laughed at the old man that was fool enough to buy that bottle.

"A worthy old man he seemed," Keawe said. "But no one can judge by appearances. For why did the old reprobate require the bottle?"

"My husband," said Kokua, humbly, "his purpose may have been good."

Keawe laughed like an angry man.

"Fiddle-de-dee!" cried Keawe. "An old rogue, I tell you; and an old ass to boot. For the bottle was hard enough to sell at four centimes; and at three it will be quite impossible. The margin is not broad enough, the thing begins to smell of scorching—brrr!" said he, and shuddered. "It is true I bought it myself at a cent, when I knew not there were smaller coins. I was a fool for my pains; there will never be found another, and whoever has that bottle will carry it to the pit."

"O my husband!" said Kokua. "Is it not a terrible thing to save oneself by the eternal ruin of another? It seems to me I could not laugh. I would be humbled. I would be filled with melancholy. I would pray for the poor holder."

Then Keawe, because he felt the truth of what she said, grew

the more angry. "Heighy-teighy!" cried he. "You may be filled with melancholy if you please. It is not the mind of a good wife. If you thought at all of me, you would sit shamed."

Thereupon he went out, and Kokua was alone.

What chance had she to sell that bottle at two centimes? None, she perceived. And if she had any, here was her husband hurrying her away to a country where there was nothing lower than a cent. And here—on the morrow of her sacrifice—was her husband leaving her and blaming her.

She would not even try to profit by what time she had, but sat in the house, and now had the bottle out and viewed it with unutterable fear, and now, with loathing, hid it out of sight.

By and by, Keawe came back, and would have her take a drive.

"My husband, I am ill," she said. "I am out of heart. Excuse me, I can take no pleasure."

Then was Keawe more wroth than ever. With her, because he thought she was brooding over the case of the old man; and with himself because he thought she was right, and was ashamed to be so happy.

"This is your truth," cried he, "and this is your affection! Your husband is just saved from eternal ruin, which he encountered for the love of you—and you can take no pleasure! Kokua, you have a disloyal heart."

He went forth again furious, and wandered in the town all day. He met friends, and drank with them; they hired a carriage and drove into the country, and there drank again. All the time, Keawe was ill at ease, because he was taking this pastime while his wife was sad, and because he knew in his heart that she was more right than he; and the knowledge made him drink the deeper.

Now, there was an old brutal Haole drinking with him, one that had been a boatswain of a whaler—a runaway, a digger in gold mines, and convict in prisons. He had a low mind and a foul mouth; he loved to drink and see others drunk; and he pressed the glass upon Keawe. Soon there was no more money in the company.

"Here, you!" says the boatswain, "you are rich, you have been always saying. You have a bottle or some foolishness."

"Yes," says Keawe, "I am rich; I will go back and get some money from my wife, who keeps it."

"That's a bad idea, mate," said the boatswain. "Never you trust a petticoat with dollars. They're all as false as water; you keep an eye on her."

Now, this word struck in Keawe's mind; for he was muddled with what he had been drinking.

"I should not wonder but she was false, indeed," thought he. "Why else should she be so cast down at my release? But I will show her I am not the man to be fooled. I will catch her in the act."

Accordingly, when they were back in town, Keawe bade the boatswain wait for him at the corner, by the old calaboose, and went forward up the avenue alone to the door of his house. The night had come again; there was a light within, but never a sound; and Keawe crept about the corner, opened the back door softly, and looked in.

There was Kokua on the floor, the lamp at her side; before her was a milk-white bottle, with a round belly and a long neck; and as she viewed it, Kokua wrung her hands.

A long time Keawe stood and looked in the doorway. At first he was struck stupid; and then fear fell upon him that the bargain had been made amiss, and the bottle had come back to him as it came in San Francisco; and at that his knees were loosened, and the fumes of the wine departed from his head like mists off a river in the morning. And then he had another thought; and 'it was a strange one, that made his cheeks to burn.

"I must make sure of this," thought he.

So he closed the door, and went softly round the corner again, and then came noisily in, as though he were but now returned. And, lo! by the time he opened the front door no bottle was to be seen; and Kokua sat in a chair and started up like one awakened out of sleep.

"I have been drinking all day and making merry," said Keawe. "I have been with good companions, and now I only come back for money, and return to drink and carouse with them again."

Both his face and voice were as stern as judgment, but Kokua was too troubled to observe.

"You do well to use your own, my husband," said she, and her words trembled.

"Oh, I do well in all things," said Keawe, and he went straight to the chest and took out money. But he looked besides in the corner where they kept the bottle, and there was no bottle there.

At that the chest heaved upon the floor like a sea billow, and the house spun about him like a wreath of smoke, for he saw she was lost now, and there was no escape. "It is what I feared," he thought. "It is she who has bought it."

And then he came to himself a little and rose up; but the sweat streamed on his face as thick as the rain and as cold as the well water.

"Kokua," said he, "I said to you today what ill became me. Now I return to carouse with my jolly companions," and at that he laughed a little quietly. "I will take more pleasure in the cup if you forgive me."

She clasped his knees in a moment; she kissed his knees with flowing tears. "Oh," she cried, "I asked but a kind word!"

"Let us never one think hardly of the other," said Keawe, and was gone out of the house.

Now, the money that Keawe had taken was only some of that store of centime pieces they had laid in at their arrival. It was very sure he had no mind to be drinking. His wife had given her soul for him, now he must give his for hers; no other thought was in the world with him.

At the corner, by the old calaboose, there was the boatswain waiting.

"My wife has the bottle," said Keawe, "and, unless you help me to recover it, there can be no more money and no more liquor tonight."

"You do not mean to say you are serious about that bottle?" cried the boatswain.

"There is the lamp," said Keawe. "Do I look as if I was jesting?"

"That is so," said the boatswain. "You look as serious as a ghost."

"Well, then," said Keawe, "here are two centimes; you must go to my wife in the house, and offer her these for the bottle, which (if I am not much mistaken) she will give you instantly. Bring it to me here, and I will buy it back from you for one; for that is the law with this bottle, that it still must be sold for a less sum. But whatever you do, never breathe a word to her that you have come from me."

"Mate, I wonder are you making a fool of me?" asked the boatswain.

"It will do you no harm if I am," returned Keawe.

"That is so, mate," said the boatswain.

"And if you doubt me," added Keawe, "you can try. As soon as you are clear of the house, wish to have your pocket full of money, or a bottle of the best rum, or what you please, and you will see the virtue of the thing."

"Very well, Keawe," says the boatswain. "I will try; but if you

are having your fun out of me; I will take my fun out of you with a belaying pin."

So the whaler man went off up the avenue; and Keawe stood and waited. It was near the same spot where Kokua had waited the night before; but Keawe was more resolved, and never faltered in his purpose; only his soul was bitter with despair.

It seemed a long time he had to wait before he heard a voice singing in the darkness of the avenue. He knew the voice to be the boatswain's; but it was strange how drunken it appeared upon a sudden.

Next the man himself came stumbling into the light of the lamp. He had the devil's bottle buttoned in his coat; another bottle was in his hand; and even as he came in view he raised it to his mouth and drank.

"You have it," said Keawe. "I see that."

"Hands off!" cried the boatswain, jumping back. "Take a step near me, and I'll smash your mouth. You thought you could make a cat's paw of me, did you?"

"What do you mean?" cried Keawe.

"Mean?" cried the boatswain. "This is a pretty good bottle, this is; that's what I mean. How I got it for two centimes I can't make out; but I am sure you sha'n't have it for one."

"You mean you won't sell?" gasped Keawe.

"No sir," cried the boatswain. "But I'll give you a drink of the rum, if you like."

"I tell you," said Keawe, "the man who has that bottle goes to hell."

"I reckon I'm going anyway," returned the sailor; "and this bottle's the best thing to go with I've struck yet. No, sir!" he cried again, "this is my bottle now, and you can go and fish for another."

"Can this be true?" Keawe cried. "For your own sake, I beseech you, sell it me!"

"I don't value any of your talk," replied the boatswain. "You thought I was a flat, now you see I'm not; and there's an end. If you won't have a swallow of the rum, I'll have one myself. Here's your health, and good night to you!"

So off he went down the avenue toward town, and there goes the bottle out of the story.

But Keawe ran to Kokua light as the wind; and great was their joy that night; and great, since then, has been the peace of all their days in the Bright House.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Pattina Olstad

I have been reading a lot of books by female authors lately—books in various mystery subgenres—and thought it might be interesting to devote one whole set of reviews to books by women. The following is a cross-section of those that have arrived in my mailbox in the last three months—it is by no means *all* of them. They range from British police procedurals and cosies to comic mysteries and hardboiled American private eye novels. While some are entries in ongoing series, others are promising first novels and still others are reissues of classics long out of print.

Dorothy Simpson's likeable family-oriented policeman, Luke Thanet, returns, investigating the death of the black-sheep member of a family that owns a deluxe stately home/hotel on the outskirts of Sturrenden in Kent. **Dead by Morning** (Scribners, \$16.95, 277 pp), like other Simpson books, follows Thanet's family life as much as his investigation of the murder. This time it is his son who is giving them problems, problems that constantly intrude on Thanet when he is trying to concentrate on what new oddity his supervisor, Superintendent Goronwy Draco, is imposing on the office now.

Sue Dunlap introduces a new private detective in former medical examiner turned private eye Kiernan O'Shaughnessy. O'Shaughnessy's first case is **Pious Deception** (Villard, \$16.95,

209 pp), when she is called in by a small Phoenix parish to investigate the suicide (or was it murder?) of an ambitious priest. Kiernan's antagonism toward the Catholic Church almost makes her turn the job down, and she begins to regret taking it when it looks as if she is being set up to take the blame for the potential scandal the church hopes to avoid. Kiernan is a particularly likeable character, hardboiled but still a little vulnerable, and her ex-San Diego Charger "houseboy" is a delight. The villains are villainous, the Arizona settings are vivid, and the solution to the murder is satisfying.

Joan Hess's humorous Ozarks mystery series continues with **Much Ado in Maggody** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 197 pp). Sheriff Arly Hanks has to deal with the women's rights strike, organized by an outsider but wholeheartedly supported by Arly's mother and the other women in Maggody, Arkansas, while investigating the murder of a nasty bank officer and arson at the bank. As a result of the investigation, embezzlement, blackmail, and sexual harassment emerge as possible motives. Arly has to solve this murder fast so her mother will get back to cooking in the café. Otherwise, Arly will have to live on crackers and soup!

The Bandersnatch by Mollie Hardwick (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 179 pp) is the fourth in a series about Dorian Fairweather, antiques dealer and wife of the vicar, Rodney Chelmarsh. Dorian and Rodney have a child now, and Rodney has given up his vicarship. Finances are rather tight; nonetheless, Dorian becomes enamored of a painted cherub and buys it because it looks so like her baby. When several strangers try to purchase the cherub and at least two burglaries are attempted, Dorian's fascination with the statue begins to wane. But when the baby is kidnapped and held for ransom—the cherub—Dorian and Rodney get back into the investigation game. Lots of references to Lewis Carroll lend atmosphere to this endearing entry in the Dorian Fairweather series.

Alison Gordon, formerly a sports writer who covered the Toronto Bluejays, has written a first mystery called **The Dead Pull Hitter** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 222 pp). It stars, appropriately enough, a sports writer named Katherine Henry who covers the Toronto Titans. The Titans have made the playoffs, but the designated hitter—a self-styled Romeo who couldn't field—is found murdered before the playoffs begin. Kate, with the blessings of her paper, is investigating the murder as a sports story in parallel with the police investigation. Naturally that places her in some danger—from

both the killer and the police, who feel that she is interfering at best and concealing evidence at worst. A rare entry in the sports subgenre—not many are written by women—which is literate and understandable, even to those who are not baseball fans.

Karen Kijewski won the Private Eye Writers of America Best First Private Eye Novel contest with **Katwalk** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 232 pp). Kat Colorado is a Sacramento private investigator who, at the request of her friend, advice columnist Charity Collins, is tracing Charity's missing husband Sam and the two hundred thousand dollars that went missing with him. *Katwalk* takes Kat to Las Vegas where she encounters an old friend from high school who is now an employee of some shady character. Murder, real estate dealing, and gambling all become part of the investigation of the disappearance of Charity's money. Particularly nice characterization of Kat and her new friends, a Las Vegas investigative reporter and a homicide cop.

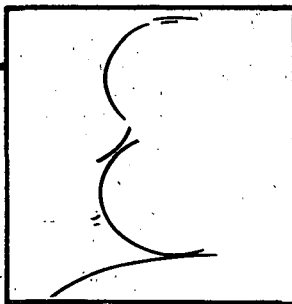
Do you like cats? Have you ever attended a cat show? If you answered "yes" to either of these questions, then you will like **Murder at the Cat Show** by Marion Babson (St. Martin's, \$14.95, 192 pp). The hero, public relations specialist Doug Perkins, doesn't particularly like cats and has never attended a cat show, but he is covering the publicity for the "Cats Through the Ages Exhibition." When a not-very-likeable owner of a Siamese champion and organizer of the exhibition is found killed by two tigers who are also part of the show, Doug finds himself investigating and acting as surrogate owner for the now "orphaned" Siamese. The cat show ambience is good, and the cats are perfect. This reissued Babson mystery is highly recommended to animal lovers.

Also reissued are several novels by Christianna Brand. Her medical classic, **Green for Danger** (Carrol & Graf, \$7.95, 251 pp), explores several unexplained deaths in a British military hospital during World War II. *Green Is for Danger* stars Brand's series detective, Detective-Inspector Cockrill from Kent, who is called in to cover the case in place of the local constabulary. Wonderful local color, particularly among the military.

Another of Brand's reissues is **Death in High Heels** (Carroll & Graf, \$3.95, 224 pp), which pits Mr. Chatsworth of Scotland Yard against a murder in a high-fashion dress boutique. Each of the employees has a motive to kill the victim, and Chatsworth complicates matters by falling for one of the suspects. Though it was first published in 1941, this novel is not dated, and could have taken place in the fashion district of any city in this decade.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Apartment Zero is a bizarre psychological thriller which, unfortunately, is more bizarre than thrilling. Set in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires after the fall of the Argentine military dictatorship and the disappearance of its death squads, the film centers on the relationship between two characters who are difficult to figure out. They become roommates who share a flat in an apartment house peopled by a group of eccentrics.

Lurking, at first, in the background of this story is a string of murders around town, which have the population fearing a return of the right-wing death squads. As the film progresses, the killing spree makes its way to the forefront, affecting the behavior of the roommates toward each other and of their nosy neighbors toward them.

Adrian Le Duc (Colin Firth) is a movie buff who runs a local

cinema specializing in the classics of the silver screen. Le Duc, seemingly the too-proper Englishman, is loath to reveal anything about himself to anyone. He even hides the fact that he's not really British, but a native of Argentina. His life consists of movies and his mother, whom we meet during visits to her current residence, a mental hospital. Her deterioration makes the anti-social Le Duc even more alone.

Because his mother no longer lives with him, Le Duc decides to rent out her room at the apartment, to bring in some extra cash perhaps, or because he needs the company, dangerous though that might be to him.

After a comical scene in which he interviews a handful of odd and odder prospective renters, Le Duc finds himself enamored of an American, Jack Carney (Hart Bochner), whom he sees as a sort of reincarnation of

James Dean. Actually, this American Jack, who likes to dress in T-shirts and jeans, is more a Richard Gere type.

The two, at first, make an unlikely pair. Le Duc even makes a reference to *The Odd Couple*. Although Le Duc does exhibit some Felix Unger tendencies, a certain prissiness, Jack Carney is certainly no Oscar Madison. While Oscar lets it all hang out—what you see is what you get—Jack is hiding something behind a mask of good-natured friendliness.

The newcomer-American, although he becomes chummy with almost everyone he meets including fellow tenants in the apartment house, is as mysterious and unrevealing as Le Duc. He says he's working at a computer company's "exchange program," yet he keeps irregular office hours and seems to have little involvement with any vocation other than giving everyone, young or old, male or female, the eye.

The two, each for his own reason, become friends of sorts, in a symbiotic relationship. But the film stumbles along the way because of its painfully slow pace. Every time it threatens to reveal anything that will add to our understanding of who these men are, why they've been thrown together, and how it all relates to the string of murders, the action slows to a crawl and the audience loses interest.

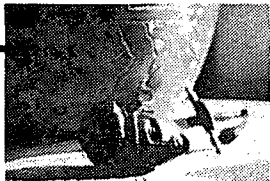
The two main characters are so off-the-beam that any mainstream audience would have trouble identifying with them or caring about what happens to them. And this is not a poke at off-beat films—it's just that neither man is particularly likeable.

By the time this overlong movie concludes, with its ghoulish ending, the audience has the solution to the Buenos Aires murders but has yet to solve the mystery of what *Apartment Zero* is really about.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

1. The gangsters were wrong in feeling certain that the big valet was loyal to them.
2. Because his ignoring of the heavy thud of the bookend on the floor proved, not that he was deaf, but that he was pretending to be. Even a totally deaf person is acutely conscious of any heavy vibration near him, and some can distinguish such a vibration at a greater distance than a person with good hearing is able to do.

THE STORY THAT WON



The November Mysterious won by Daniel Walsh of Honorable mentions go to Royal Palm Beach, Florida; Strongsville, Ohio; Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California; Lane Olinghouse of Everett, Washington; Tom Rice of Metairie, Louisiana; Gerry Griffiths of San Jose, California; and Terry E. Lutwen of Canyon Lake, California.

Photograph contest was Orange Park, Florida. Michael Del Guercio of da; Brian K. White of ia Thompson of Alameda,

Photo by George Ingersoll

WHO'S THERE? by Daniel Walsh

"All right, Mr. Smith. Let's see if I got it straight: You came home and found this sword with this chopped off statue's head by your front porch. You became frightened. You went inside for your shotgun, the doorbell rang, and you blew away an Amway lady."

"The gun went off accidentally, detective. I was scared. I . . . I thought she was gonna kill me!"

"Right, Mr. Smith. You said you've been finding dead animals on your porch for the past month—ever since you moved here under the FBI's Witness Relocation Program."

"That's true, detective. There's a contract out on my life, and I thought all the stuff on my porch was a warning."

"Hit men don't give warnings, Mr. Smith. It might interest you to learn Officer Quill just got done canvassing your neighbors. Seems some of the children have been playing tricks on you. Kids put those items on your porch. Not that poor Amway lady."

"I truly am sorry, detective. I . . . I thought she was gonna kill me!"

"Right, Mr. Smith. And I have to arrest you. Officer Quill?"

"Yeah, here I am. What do you need, detective?"

"We're taking Mr. Smith downtown. I want you to bring along his shotgun."

"Sure thing, detective. And I'll bring along the handgun, too."

"Handgun? What handgun, officer?"

"The one the coroner found lying under the lady's body when they put her in the ambulance. You know . . . the .45 with a silencer on it."

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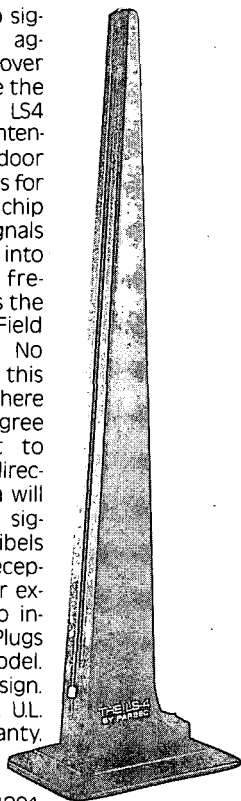
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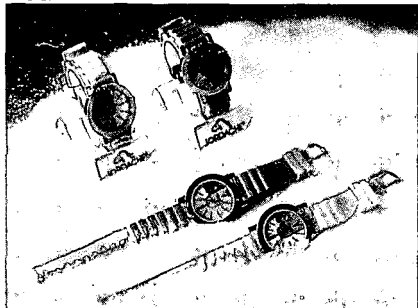
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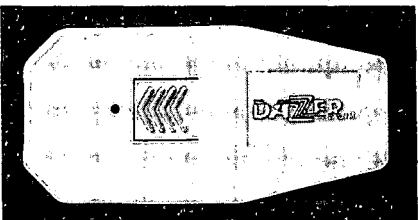
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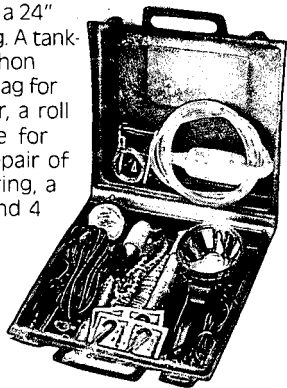
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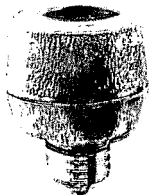


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